

Thump, *squish*, thump, squish, thump- thump- thump- SQUISH!

"Awake!"

"Red alert! Red alert! The Heart of Osiris has been stolen!"

Bending over Simon, Doctor Tony frantically placed the Scales of Anubis in Simon's hands and stabbed himself in the heart. Tony's life force glimmered purple as it flowed from his body, through the Scales, into Simon's body; his chest cavity closed, and his heart regenerated. Simon's original heart was inside the Guardian; in three weeks, the magic from Simon's heart would wear off and the Guardian would realize the Heart was missing.

As Simon undid the straps which held him to the operating table, he gazed longingly into Tony's turquoise eyes. Gently, he caressed Tony's short brown hair and kissed him before laying the body on the floor.

"SITUATION CRITICAL! THE BUILDING HAS BEEN COMPROMISED! EXIT THE BUILDING NOW!" blared the speakers through the bunker's concrete walls.

Simon hurriedly ran over to the other operating table, unfastened the Guardian, opened the sarcophagus, unceremoniously dropped the Guardian in, and closed the lid. He went back to Tony, and for one last time, turned his head up, kissed him, grabbed the Scales and ran!

"THE SPAWN OF AMMIT WILL APPEAR IN ONE MINUTE! ANY PERSONNEL WHO HAVE NOT EXITED THE BUILDING WILL BE DEVoured!"

With the stale air gushing out of the bunker, Simon dashed through the corridors.

"FIFTY SECONDS! PURGATORY IS NOT AN OPTION!"

Simon ran faster as the speakers started to wail even louder, to an ear deafening pitch.

"FORTY SECONDS! ALL PERSONNEL STILL INSIDE WILL GO INTO THE NETHERWORLD! YOU WILL NOT GET A CHANCE TO RETURN!"

Panting with sweat beading down his supple forehead, Simon picked up the pace.

"THIRTY SECONDS!" boomed the speakers. The walls began to shake. The autoritual capsule that they stole from the International Department of Magic and Public Relations (idMPR) was starting to crack. Air began to rush out of the building as the ritual commenced.

Gasping for air, Simon saw the corridor's lights flicker. Click, click, the gates began to fall.

"TEN SECONDS!" announced the speakers.

Crunch! The gates had just shut, and the lights had gone out! His fate had been sealed!

Hyperventilating, Simon collapsed on the cold hard concrete floor and held the Scales tightly to his chest. Lurking in the corner with big green eyes, a Spawn of Ammit smiled showing its big sharp white teeth. It didn't help its appearance, though. *That luscious mane and reptilian head did not go well together* thought Simon, but that didn't matter. Muscles rippling, it breathed deeply, and pounced onto Simon and dug its claws into his chest. It bent its head down to meet Simon's face and roared- air gushing from its lungs to fill the vacuum. *Yuck, corpse breath here should try brushing its teeth every now and then* thought Simon as a half-chewed eyeball slid off of one of the Spawn's teeth and slipped down Simon's cheek.

Using the last of his energy, Simon, with the Scales firmly gripped by his left hand, snapped his right fingers together to conjure a fireball; it burned through the Spawn's unkempt flesh, and purple lights danced from its body and rejuvenated Simon.

The Spawn's life force rushed throughout Simon's body, flooding him with tons of adenosine triphosphate (ATP) that his body could now freely use. *What energy the Spawn possessed!* thought Simon. Thrusting his arms to his sides, he thought of Tony; the concrete floor rippled, and waves of polychromatic light toyed playfully along the walls like light reflecting off of water; he let himself fall backwards, as the spell consumed his energy, and a multicolored portal opened up inside his homestead, directly above his bed. Shortly after falling onto his soft soft bed covered in cute stuffed animals he had collected over the years, Simon collapsed in a fit of exhaustion and fell asleep. All of his energy had been consumed from casting that teleport spell and had to be regained.

The rest of the Spawns of Ammit ruthlessly devoured weak staff left in the building, sending their souls to the NetherWorld. Now that their job was complete, the Spawn's of Ammit left the bunker, creating an implosion each time one of them teleported to enter Purgatory and return to Ammit's duties. By the time the last Spawn had teleported away, a gash had appeared in the Rocky Mountains, disrupting its precious landscape.

On the second floor above a diner in Upper Manhattan, three men and three women, drinking coffee and tea, sat around a polished mahogany table with the Heart of Osiris beating steadily-thump, squish, thump, squish, thump. Sunlight flooded the room from a nearby window. With her back to the sunlight, Jun finished her cup of lemon balm tea and lifted her head up to face her partners. First, she turned to her right to gaze into her girlfriend's, Gorica's, hazel eyes. She returned the pleasant gaze and returned to sipping her espresso. Then, she turned a little right to look at Aucaman's glowing amber eyes. Looking straight ahead to the far end of the table, she tried to look Kojo in the eyes, but he did not make eye contact and continued to stare at his green tea. Left of Kojo was Betje, a small woman with gray eyes who hastily made eye contact with Jun. Kai, to Betje's right and Jun's left, readily met Jun's eyes with his sapphire eyes shining like the sea; he went back to drinking his sea salted caramel coffee.

“Ready?” asked Jun.

“Ready!” shouted her comrades in return.

Jun picked the Heart off of the table, grabbed her snake leather tote, and hid it inside. They quickly drank the rest of their coffee and tea, exited their kitchen, walked into the master bedroom’s grand closet and began picking out their outfits to wear for the Great Celebration going on in the streets outside, going on in the streets all over the world for three enjoyable weeks.

Meanwhile, on her grandiose sandstone pedestal in Purgatory, Ammit- larger than a comet- sitting back on her hind legs with her crocodile head thrust upward gazed from left to right. In the early years after the Great War, humanity had signed a contract with Ammit allowing her to keep a standing army of one million souls- dismissed and reformed on an annual basis- to maintain order and help her with her newly established duties, now that Osiris, Yama, Santa Muerte, Odin, and all the other deities of the dead were gone. Since her paw-nails were dislocated from devouring five thousand unfortunate souls this morning that had not made up their mind on where to go, she had relegated fifteen percent of her army to the task of conjigling her blood-red paw-nails back into place.

A large gray mostly barren expanse of land- sparsely thicketed with grasping banyan trees- went on in front and behind her forever. In bursts of light, souls appeared in the barren land, some more confused than others. She hated that look those humans always gave when they died; they should know better by now. *More than enough of their kind choose to return to Earth. They should all know what to expect when they die; those government institutionalized body swap shops should have better instructions*, she thought. Nevertheless, she decided she would oblige those stinking apes.

Rearing up onto her hind legs, Ammit stood large and powerful. She liked to show off: seven-soul abs like hers were hard to come by. In a deep baritone, her voice reverberated throughout Purgatory- even knocking a few million weaklings down in the process.

“Salutations Humans! Welcome to Purgatory! This is my realm, and you will obey my rules! I am the Supreme Director of Eternal Affairs, or, as they used to call me, Ammit.”

Pointing in front of herself towards the white dwarf star, she said, “This is North. The sun shall rise each day from this direction and set in the South, behind me.” Raising her volume even more, because she knew some idiots would forget, Ammit announced, “Carefully observe and be aware of the rising and falling of the sun, mortals. You will have seven days to make up your mind on whether to return to Earth or enter the NetherWorld. To the East,” pointing to her left, “that milky horizon of the cosmos will take you back to Earth and back to home, if you can find it. Otherwise, you might end up somewhere you have never heard of. To the West,” pointing to her right, “that splotchy psychedelic light-show, it looks different for everyone, will take you to

the NetherWorld. I do not know what lies in or beyond it, for anyone who enters never comes back. Whatever mirages or illusions you see to the West, pay close attention. They foretell your future.” She had said enough, but she absolutely abhorred that dumbfounded look humans give her when she’s forced to devour them for overstaying their welcome and not making up their minds.

Ring-a-ding! Kling-a-dinga-ling! The telephone to idMPR’s Bureau of Complaint Management danced, almost jumping off its ebony desk. Behind the desk sits a man in a generic standard issue gray business suit and black bowler hat. His whiskers twitched in nervous expectation of the next unhappy caller. *Too many people do not read the safety information on the magical trinkets they buy*, he thought; *if only they read those damned instructions*, he sighed. Albeit, the incidents he handled usually make for good newspaper headlines: “Sculptor in New York Turns to Stone” “Hunter Dies with Rifle up His Arse” “Fisherman Eaten Alive by Tuna.” All of these incidents could have been avoided if they knew how to properly operate their trinkets.

Rrrrrinnng! The phone danced even more impatiently. *Usually people hung up or were redirected to another receptionist after waiting this long*, he thought. *We must be at full capacity*, he sighed again and reluctantly picked up the telephone.

“Hello! Welcome sir, madame, or intersex! This is the International Department of Magic and Public Relations’s Bureau of Complaint Management hotline! I am Chang, your assistant. How may I assist you today?”

“Put me on line with the Director of the International Department of Magic and Public Relations!” roared Ammit.

“I am terribly sorry madame, sir, or intersex, but we have had too many calls in the past years of people claiming to have an urgent need to speak with the Director that your pointless call must be terminated.”

“But I am Ammit!” she growled.

“Can you provide a form of identification?” said Chang.

“I am Ammit!!!! What kind of identification am I supposed to provide? Stinkin’ mortal!” she screamed.

“Can you....” just as the words exited his mouth, his ex-wife’s decaying corpse reappeared standing upright in front of him. Her eyes were swollen and rotten; teeth were missing; worms were crawling through her body, and it made a horrible squishy sound as they moved through her body. He knew he should have cremated her body.

His whiskers twitched a little too much; they looked like they were about to jump off his face. “Oh my! Good heavens me! Well, yes, it does appear so that you are Ammit! I will have you on line with the Director in just a moment!” His eyes rolled back as his mind connected to the Ether. His mind appeared just outside his apartment complex; that was the door to his body which he had just left. *Thank goodness* he thought, *the putrid smell of his ex-wife was too much to handle*. On second thought, *she had lost considerable weight; maybe death had done her body some good*. Seeing the Director’s Gray Tower in the distance, he sent himself quicker through the Ether to find the Director’s mind. Flying through the Ether was like passing through heavy English fog; he could feel its stickiness all over himself. Quietly, he landed at the entrance to the Gray Tower, and banged on the door with the knocker. *Humph*, he sighed again. *That was odd*. There was a new knocker on the door- a VooDoo Doll this time. *Could the Director just make up his mind and keep the Gray Tower the same?* Whatever! It is his mind he was knocking on, so the Director’s strange taste in decorum really was not any of his business unless he wanted the Director commenting on the suit he was wearing, or lack thereof. Chang was a nudist deep down inside; he loved that gentle breeze he felt down his back and between the legs while walking through the woods in a cool Autumn day.

“Hullo! Who is this??” yelled the Director from the top of the Gray Tower, his gnarly arthritic kneecaps showing beneath his shiny blue nightgown. No identification was necessary, really; Chang was not that hard to recognize with the whole package and everything, but he asked anyways for formality’s sake.

“This is Chang!” said Chang. “Ammit is on the line! May you possess my body for a few minutes and talk to him? I would not risk routing the call through another line.” He shivered as dewdrops formed on his exposed skin and trickled through his hair. “And please be, ba-be quick,” he stuttered, “Ammit is not in a good mood, and I am getting cold!”

“Shore, I wale!” slurred the Director as he threw off his nightgown and put on a hot-magenta business suit to make his bony shoulders look bigger and stronger. The Director was quite muscular and handsome in the flesh, but he felt like an old man because he really was. He just always kept choosing to return to his job by visiting the body swap shops every time he was killed in action. Such dedication! He probably did not trust any of those young’ins to take over idMPR and rightly so. Young’ins are soo irresponsible, just like himself. His new body came from a high school football player who apparently felt that the NetherWorld was better than life on Earth. So, they traded places. Anyhow, it seemed the Director had too much fun last night- whatever that meant; new bodies were so much fun to test drive- whatever that meant. He clambered out of his Gray Tower and sped through the Ether, running over a few of his minions and a couple strangers, to Chang’s apartment complex, opened the door and Chang’s eyes rolled back into position.

“Hello Ammit! This is the Director of the International Department of Magic and Public Relations on the line. I just possessed Chang’s body because I was too lazy to get out of bed.

How may I help your majesty?" asked the Director. Suddenly, he noticed what was in the room- Chang's dead ex-wife's body.

"Well, you made quite an impression on young Chang, he seemed a little nervous. Now get that corpse out the room!" Although he was used to such gruesome scenes due to the nature of his job, it still violated protocol. "How many times have I told you that summoning corpses was inappropriate conduct and an unacceptable form of identification?"

"Five thousand three hundred eighty six times and counting, mortal!" said Ammit. "Your staff are so adorable when they are scared. I could just eat them now, were it not illegal. Four hundred of my Spawn were summoned to a bunker in Colorado, and only three hundred ninety nine returned. One is missing. Do you know where my child is? You better know! I only granted idMPR access to my Spawn Capsules, so that you can clean up any messes that get too big for you to handle."

"We have no operations going on in Colorado- too many drugs there. Popping up like weeds all over the place, they be. If I did not know better, one of my agents would have eaten that capsule, if he lived in Colorado."

"Well apparently someone did, and one of my Spawn is missing! I cannot do anything to you on Earth, but if you die, I will have my army capture you and then slowly devour you in Purgatory!" screeched Ammit.

"Calm down," said the Director, "I will have the Bureau of Justice on the case to find out what happened in that bunker in Colorado."

"Fine," said Ammit, "have a fantastic day!" She was pissed and slammed the phone down with a terrible thud that shook her pedestal and chipped seven of her twenty-two paw-nails. Those would have to be taken care of later; she had more pressing things on her mind.

Well, that did not go well, thought the Director. He rolled Chang's eyes back and reappeared in the Ether outside of Chang's apartment complex. While drifting lazily through the hazy Ether, he heard a scream. Flying faster, he saw a flash of light and a shockwave reverberated through the Ether- someone had died while in contact. Sniffing the air, he tried to pick out the scent of that person's mind to see if he could recognize it. There was no scent at all, nothing he be smelled. Highly unusual, he thought. A high-level spell must have been cast to wipe someone that thoroughly from the Ether upon death. Increasing his speed, he finally reached the Gray Tower to his body and found Chang, a nudist, sprawled asleep on the top of the Gray Tower. The Director thought and looked; Chang was a nice guy, kinda handsome with his mustache and soul patch, rather incompetent though. Carelessness can only be corrected by learning from one's mistakes.

So, he gently picked Chang up in his arms, cuddled him for a moment, fiddled with his mustache- twitching as Chang breathed in and out-, and threw him off of the Gray Tower with great force. Chang fell down, down, down, and down for what seemed an eternity.

The Director floated down the roof and flew through his window into his room. He decided he would wait until Chang woke up, which might be a while.

The Director changed out of his business suit, slipped on a pair of white golf shorts, a light blue polo t-shirt, a baseball cap, gloves, and got his golf balls and clubs. He briskly walked down the Gray Tower's staircase; a loud clunk emanated throughout the Gray Tower each time he stepped. The sound hurt his ears, and he went back to floating.

After what seemed to be twenty minutes, he reached the bottom of the Gray Tower and flung the heavy wooden door wide open, sending a couple suits of armor flying through the air which landed with a loud klunk, klunk, kerpuddle. The Director floated through over the threshold, imagined a green golf course which appeared in front of him, and he set up a tee to begin the game.

After placing the golfball on the tee, Chang's head poked through the golf course right beside the tee, and the Director whacked the golf club right straight at the golf ball, barely missing Chang's head. That ought to teach him!

"Watch where you swing that thing!" yelled Chang.

"Watch where you fall asleep, Chang!" said the Director. "You just lost your Winter Festival break because of that stunt of yours. Anyone could have entered my body by accessing the Ether while you were asleep, and it would seem that that might just have happened. As someone was just killed today by a high-level spell that left no trace of the deceased, and we have no witnesses to the incident. You were close to the scene, apparently naked and sleeping like a baby on the roof of my Gray Tower. Do you have any excuses?"

"Uh, um," Chang gulped, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down while condensation trickled down his body, "no sir, I have no excuses. It was just a lovely day in the Ether, and I felt like taking a nap. You must try it some time. The sensation of water forming and trickling gently down one's body is most relaxing and conducive to the imagination. I cannot deny what a wonderful dream I had. Would you like to hear it?"

Turning red in his cheeks, the Director yelled, "NO! I DO NOT WANT TO HEAR ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR DREAM! GO BACK TO YOUR BODY AND GET BACK TO WORK!"

Zig-zagging through the fog, Chang drifted through the Ether to his apartment complex at a snail's pace. He opened the door to his apartment complex, sighed heavily making his mustache twitch several times. His eyes rolled back into position, and he returned to his body.

Work would be a pain, he thought, but he knew that the bills had to get paid somehow. Also, he loved the health insurance options, paid-leave, and retirement plan that came with his job at the International Department of Magic and Public Relations's Bureau of Complaint Management. With another fretful sigh, not as exasperated as before, he dutifully returned to work. *It was all worth it in the end*, he thought, he hoped.

Golf course disappearing in a burst of flames, as the Director vented his anger inside the Ether for Chang's shenanigans. *What a good pun*, he thought. *Chang got into changnanigans*. The Director imagined a searing hot fire and burnt his clothes off of his body; *maybe Chang was right; maybe he did need to relax a little*.

So the Director floated up onto the roof of the Gray Tower and sprawled his legs and arms wide across the roof. Gradually, dewdrops formed over his frail thin wrinkly body. As the dewdrops gathered and sank into the crevices and folds between his wrinkles, the water dripped slowly down his body like rivers through a forest, deeply massaging his aching muscles, recharging his mind and spirit.

He relaxed even more and opened his mind to the Call of the Void, the Ether's eternal noise; usually the emptiness of it all made people insane after returning alone from the Ether, but he, in his wisdom, had instituted a rule that all personnel at the International Department of Magic and Public Relations (even the help desk assistants, however useless they are in the field) must pass an entrance exam that tested how adept, alert, and composed they were in the Ether.

The grandeur of his genius inspired himself even more, and his body relaxed, including his bowels which emptied onto the roof which quite surprised him when he felt it trickling down his legs. In all the times he has been in the Ether, he did not know that he would ever had to go to the bathroom in there. *Time to add a bathroom*, he thought, and a bathroom appeared on the fifth floor out of two thousand nine hundred thirty four floors and counting in his Gray Tower.

Well, what a mess there was on his legs, the shining Sun's rays appeared in his mind, and all the urea and feces were vaporized from his body and the roof. Floating down from the roof of the Gray Tower, entering his bedroom through the window, floating past his bed, and ironically, opening the closet door, he stepped inside; his eyes rolled back into position, and he went back to bed. Finding Ammit's lost Spawn could wait; his bed was so comforting and warm.

Waking in a cold sweat, Simon was gasping for air, and the Scales of Anubis flew out of his hands and onto the floor. He thought he dreamed that the Guardian with its ratchet bony body and pieces of decrepit cloth falling off was running after him to drain his life-force. *It was just a dream*, Simon realized and returned to breathing normally.

Leaning over to the left side of his bed, he grabbed the picture of Tony and himself that lay on his blue antique bedside dresser. Officially, they were recognized by law as being in a domestic partnership. Simon had a Master's Degree in Cultural Anthropology and two certificates- one internationally verified him as the AUM (Sorcerer Absolute) and another in ethnobotany. Tony was a Doctor in Biochemistry with two Bachelor's degrees- one in Integrative Ecosocial Design and another in Agroecology. Simon pulled the picture close to his chest and turned to the right side of his bed and gazed out the window. The sun had just begun to rise over the food forest that Simon and Tony had planted together ten years ago in honor of becoming domestic partners; it was not marriage, had the same benefits, though, but it was as close they could get legally.

After the Great War, humanity still struggled with the issue of laws versus religion and opted for divvying up the planet by the pre-war boundaries the gods had claimed.

With all the attention he got from government agencies and the press for being the AUM, he wanted to get out of the spotlight and live in peace. So, this is where he was stuck; *it was not so bad*, he thought. He had plenty of money in the bank, but everyone was always asking something of him. *Couldn't people handle their own business? Magic does not solve everything*, he thought; however much, he wished it could.

Monkeys and macaws clambered and flew gracefully through the food forest gobbling up the nuts and berries as they went. Cautiously, Simon placed the picture on his bed, undressed, went to his dresser, and put new clothes on- nice moccasins, a pink button down shirt, and tight fitting blue jean shorts that nicely accented his firm buttocks. He grabbed the picture of Tony and himself, put on his sunglasses and walked downstairs to admire the beauty they had created together.

He passed the kitchen, the meat chopping block, and exited onto the wooden porch which creaked as his feet stepped on it. It was a gentle creak, the reassuring sound that mothers and fathers wait for to know that their children are home; he had always waited each night for that creak to tell him softly that his lover Tony was home, but that was all for nought and made him cry. Tony had sacrificed himself to keep Simon alive, but it all meant nothing now that the Heart of Osiris was gone, and the Guardian is going to be hunting him down in three weeks.

Well, may as well enjoy what little time there is left, Simon thought as he walked across the porch and past his herb spiral. The mint was doing well and so were the rosemary, thyme, and other lovely fragrant herbs. They all looked pretty as their flowers danced in the gentle breeze that coursed through the food forest and cuddled his face and plants. *Maybe it was a good time to make a mint julep; that mint sure seemed peachy*. Nah, on second thought, his stomach did not handle alcohol very well, and he knew better. Last time he had alcohol, it was at church during his first communion, and he threw up half-digested scrambled eggs, bacon, orange juice, wine, and all onto the bishop. The bishop stayed silent and made the sign of the cross on his forehead seven times and continued to give communion to the rest of the children with liquids and food still dripping down his robe, and the congregation just gapped in horror and proceeded to pray to

the Lord for Simon, even though Dionysus was probably a better choice. Those stains on the bishop's robes would not come out very easily and nor would the humiliation Simon felt. That would be a pretty hard thing to live up to. So he carried on his way past the herb spiral and dismissed the thought of drinking a mint julep from his mind. Though, puke can always go into a compost pile for recycling. *Better not, it would be a waste of energy to try again and expect different results; that was the definition of insanity*, he thought.

So he continued to walk past the herb spiral, and short annuals surrounded the mulched path that he walked on. As he got closer to the food forest, the plants started to change from short annuals, to tall annuals, to short biennials, to tall biennials, then to short perennials, and finally to tall perennials which welcomed Simon into the food forest's final edge that melded into the food forest itself. Where he stood, persimmon saplings reached up to his chest, and he patted their lovely heads. In time, they would be big and strong, just like Simon's relationship with Tony had grown from a simple chat at a coffee shop in town to ten years of a domestic partnership. Simon cried, teardrops trickling down his tan face covered in blonde fuzz, and he held the picture even closer to his chest. The pain hurt him; it was worse than anything else that had happened to him before. Hands clutched close to his chest, he ducked beneath a paw-paw tree and sent the chickens and goats running in all directions as he dashed into the food forest to hide, eat, cry, and experience catharsis; such strong emotions had to be purged. Birds flew back into their nests and squirrels scampered up the trees as the sound of his feet breaking branches and leaves echoed throughout Simon's food forest.

Simon ran faster and faster, heading North, as the tears streamed down his face, and the sun, in all its glory, could barely be seen through the dense canopy the trees had formed over the years. Honeysuckle vines and grapes weaved back and forth over the trees summoning bees and bugs with their scrumptious fragrances; the bees buzzed over head, and the bugs fluttered back and forth in an intricate dance gathering nectar for their families.

Despite the beautiful flowers, despite the lively goats that climbed the trees, despite all the wonderful complexities of life that surrounded him, Simon collapsed in the middle of their food forest. He pounded the ground, kicked the chicken-of-the-woods mushrooms off of some fallen logs, and slapped a wandering pig on its tender cheeks. It raised its head in befuddlement over what it had done to earn that and ran away.

But none of it helped Simon: his boyfriend- Tony- was not there to show him, open his eyes to the endless wonder of the universe. He missed how Tony gently held his hand as they walked through their food forest every morning and night- ten years, ten long lovely years. Simon's ears were enthralled by Tony's soothing voice that touched his ears like warm chocolate on the tongue.

As a breeze rustled through the food forest, a walnut fell from the sky and hit Simon right between the eyes- disrupting his train of thoughts. What would Tony say? He would say that nature produces no waste and proceed to bury the walnut; as Tony would do, Simon lifted his

angst, fear, and grief slowly from his mind, and tried to let it all go. Clarity sank in as the wind cleared an opening in the canopy and let him see the sun.

The grass and the trees and the green-colored beings caught and stored the sun's energy while it was abundant, Tony would have said. Likewise, Simon unbuttoned his t-shirt, threw it to his side, and let his firm fuzzy chest and abs and arms soak up the sun's nourishing healing rays. It felt good. He could feel his body absorbing the sunlight and producing vitamin d.

Unbeknownst to him, a snail had crawled from the grass and was trailing up his tan legs, and it reminded him again of the sweet proverbs that Tony always seemed to extrapolate from nature. The snail would represent the slow and steady pace that nature takes to solving problems, and as such, Simon chose to breathe deeper and close his eyes.

Calmly and respectfully, he picked the snail off of his leg and placed it on a nearby lion's mane mushroom.

As Simon's levels of vitamin d built up in his body, he felt stronger and more relaxed. He pressed his hands into the ground, green light bubbling from his palms, and asked the mycelium below, "How are you doing?"

"Oh, we are fine! All is normal! The trees are supplying us with sugar, as usual, and they have been gratefully accepting our medicinal and water merchandise." said Myco Prime- the head mycelium..

"I'm glad to hear you are doing well!" said Simon.

"How are you?" said Myco Prime.

"Not good! Not good at all!" said Simon.

"And why do you not feel good?" said Myco Prime, already knowing the answer because the Great Baobab Tree had told it what events had transpired in the forest but asked anyways to be nice.

Sniffing a little bit, emotions returning again, Simon disjointedly told Myco Prime, "My boyfriend...just died!"

"I am dearly sorry to hear that Simon, but as Tony would have told you, all things die in the end. Everything catches up to you eventually," said Myco Prime, unaware of the Guardian's eventual return to hunt Simon and the Heart down.

Pitter-patter-pitter-patter, a pitcher plant leaned down from the the canopy and dripped water, sugars, and digestive juices onto Simon's head. Simon understood without having to tune his ear

to its frequency: *accidents and calamities are not an excuse for bad behavior. Go apologize for abusing that pig. One should not take their anger out on others for something they have not done. That is a waste of energy and time for both parties involved.* Simon returned the greeting by spitting onto the ground, and the pitcher plant returned to its place in the food forest.

“Can you tell the pig that I slapped in the face that I am sorry? Honestly, I did not mean it, I was very upset.” said Simon

“Yes, I will. The message will be relayed to the Great Baobab Tree who will broadcast it throughout the food forest until it reaches that poor little pig.” said Myco Prime.

A few seconds later, the Myco Prime silenced its communication channel and let Simon ponder what had just occurred. After a moment of silence, Simon picked his hand off the ground and laid back from the exhaustion the spell had caused.

He glanced up and let his teal eyes wander around. A hummingbird fluttered past his face. A gecko sunbathed on a nearby rock. A toad jumped into a tiny puddle that had formed at the bottom of a sycamore tree. All these elements worked together he thought, each one had its place in the world, but Simon could not quite figure out his.

He had a plan when the Heart of Osiris was being removed from the Guardian’s body. But, he thought he had a plan. He had a plan when Doctor Tony, dear Doctor Tony, was about to place the Heart of Osiris into his body so that he could begin the ritual. But he thought it was his! It was his dream after all that had produced the plan. But maybe not? But! But! But! Why did everything always come back to but? But this, but that!

Maybe it was fate’s way of telling him that the meaning of life was butts. Simon giggled. Tony always enjoyed those immature and snide remarks that Simon made about the universe and life in general. It helped him to relax and slow down; Tony was always the serious one, having people to teach, farms to convert into food forests, new diseases to cure, and all that other scientific jargon that Simon never understood. Maybe he should have paid more attention to Tony when he went off on those little spiels about the collapse of civilization and the incompetence of government and the general population.

It could not be helped; Simon’s regret for the way he had passively dismissed Tony’s dissemination of knowledge onto him made him cry. Tears welled up again and softened his whiskers once more. His chest heaved up and down rapidly as a wave of emotions collapsed upon him again. Squeezing his other hand tightly in anguish, the crinkling sound of paper caught his attention.

He had completely forgot about it! The picture of Tony and himself was in his hand. Uncrumpling the picture, he looked closer at it, and he noticed what it really showed.

In it, Tony and Simon were holding hands over the first tree that they had planted in their food forest, at the center, the heart of it all, their Great Baobab Tree. In laymen's terms, the baobab tree was known as the Tree of Life. What a life Tony and Simon had started after becoming domestic partners. The days and the nights, the comforting warmth they provided each other in bed, teh cuddlez, all confirmed Tony was there to guide him and fill his life with meaning. They never really had to get any closer in bed, for they felt as one when they held each other's hands. Then, suddenly, Simon noticed a tiny shiny object in the picture.

On closer inspection of the picture, though highly illegal, there was an enchanted statue of Brahma sitting and smiling humbly in front of their baobab tree with his palms resting on his crossed legs.

Simon's great great great grandmother, Susanne Braveheart the AUM (the Sorceress Absolute) had smuggled Brahma out of the Great War and protected him in his return to the Beyond. Susanne had made sure to leave no survivors; anyone who saw them together was killed because it would have been an unforgivable war crime to aid the enemy and kill her allies. She never understood why the Great War had to begin. Couldn't they have just talked out their differences with the gods? No the public had said! Talk was cheap, and too many times had the gods made promises and broken them. The threshold had been crossed! Everything had reached a tipping point! Society was on the verge of collapse with the elitist gods consuming the Earth's resources in pointless endeavors to outcompete each other in gaining humanity's favor, thus the gods' messages of peace and love and hope were lost on humanity's deaf ears. *Hypocrites are rather hard to believe!*, she thought. In the end, Susanne knew that the Great War had been inevitable; humanity had ran out of patience and had decided to take control the only way they knew how- by force. At the end of their journey, Brahma gave Susanne an enchanted living wooden statue in his likeness so that she and her descendants could use the statue as a conduit to call upon him for guidance and help throughout their lives. Susanne had only had to promise that the statue and the existence of Brahma be kept a secret, and she agreed.

Meditating on that thought, Simon placed the picture onto the grass, wiped what was left of the tears off of his face, and regained his composure. *This would be a perfect time to call upon Brahma!* So, he picked his pink button down shirt off the ground and put it back on. Then, he lifted himself off the ground and began running through his food forest to find the great baobab tree; it would know where the Brahma statue had wandered off to.

Strolling through the food forest, Simon admired how the trees, birds, goats, and other life forms capitalized on the synergy produced by working together rather than against each other. The trees provided forage for the goats; the goats spread the trees' seeds and fertilized the soil for them.

Floating on the warm rising air, a dandelion seed tapped Simon on the nose. Quickly, sensing that it knew something, green light danced through Simon's nose as he tuned into the dandelion's frequency.

“Follow the wind,” the dandelion seed whispered in Simon’s ear. As gently and quickly as it came, it left and let Simon continue on his way.

Slightly tired from his encounter, Simon slowed down to a moderate walk and breathed in the fragrant air- full of shit! That cute little dandelion had distracted him while he was walking and ended up stepping onto a pile a pig feces. He guessed he had earned it for slapping that pig in the face earlier.

With mild disgust, Simon wiped his moccasins on the grass and continued to walk through the food forest. The wind had started to pick up, and his short blonde hair got tussled by the wind. It cooled his head and steadied his mind.

As he wandered through the food forest, the landscape had changed; more rocks in increasing sizes appeared strewn across the ground to collect the sun’s heat during the day and release it during the night. More snakes, lizards, and reptiles could be seen snacking on the bountiful feast of insects that the pollinating trees and flowers brought into their domain.

Although Simon could only take energy from other life forms while holding the Scales of Anubis, he was able to recharge his energy some by running back and forth to the rocks on either side of the wind’s current to collect their stored energy. It made him feel very cozy and relaxed, almost as relaxed as he felt when he slept in bed with Tony. In his frantic ecstasy to build up enough energy to run to the Great Baobab Tree, Simon tripped over a Komodo dragon, hit his head on a rock, blood oozing out of his left temple, and laid unconscious. Unaware of the ordeal Simon had went through, the Komodo dragon sensed Simon’s body heat, lumbered over to him, lining up its body parallel to Simon’s body, side-stepped to the right, and lay ontop on Simon to stay warm in anticipation of the rising of the waxing gibbous.

In the Beyond, Yggdrasil, the World Tree, contemplated Everything as its long roots accumulated knowledge of the affairs occurring in the Ether, the NetherWorld, the Beyond, and Kay Pacha (the mortal realm). *Nothing unusual, so far*, thought Yggdrasil. *The Fates had not predicted another upheaval until the next new moon; what exciting times we live in*, thought Yggdrasil. *So much has happened this year already: the reformation of the Narakas, eliminating the worst cold and hot hells, the awakening of Chia (the Moon), the death of the hunting god Hoori who was uninformed of humanity’s rather recent decree five hundred years ago to the gods not return to Kay Pacha, and the resurrection of Saule by the Bureau of Death Management in preparation of the three week Great Celebration in honor of the five hundredth anniversary of humanity’s victory in the Great War*, thought Yggdrasil. Letting Everything be, Yggdrasil’s branches gleefully swayed back and forth and up and down- titillating the invisible arupa-loka that permeated throughout all realms of existence and nonexistence and all the dimensions of all the realms. It giggled.

Deep in one of the many white-washed marble buildings that the Bureau of Death Management had erected throughout the world, formally called Soul Redistribution Centers but commonly

called body swap shops, a gentle and frail Baltic lady with gray hair and tan skin walked up the granite steps leaning on her cane. Her wispy hair was tucked under her pink and purple paisley bandana wrapped on her head, like a nun. After ascending thirteen and a half steps, Agnese Ozolinsh walked forward, struggled with all her might to push the glass revolving door, and stumbled into Soul Redistribution Center Numero Ein Tausend Four Sampi Two Rho Tatu and gazed at the red gold speckled vaulted ceiling. Light came in through the stained glass windows that depicted Susanne Braveheart the AUM on her mechanical dragon leading the human magicians, mechanists, scholars, and berserkers into battle against the black and blue and multi-colored otherworldly demons and angels and spawn and jinn that fought in the name of the Fallen and the Survivors. She furrowed her brow; seemingly admiring and hating the stained glass window for a reason unknown to her, just a nagging feeling that something was not right, a gut instinct. She ignored it, turned right and asked the polite and pretty middle-aged red-headed Irish woman behind the help-desk, “Where do I go to donate my body? I am Agnese Ozolinsh, a, o, seven, nine, one, iota, one, beta, nine, lambda, three, tau.”

“Right here is fine!” said Iona O’ Quinn as she quickly scribbled down Madame Ozolinsh’s information onto a government form, grabbed the red wooden stick with a silver bell on the end, shook it in the air three times, sending a wailing siren-like noise through Purgatory that a new body was available.

“Do not worry,” said Iona, “the recently deceased souls in Purgatory have been notified of your vacancy. It does not take very long; most of the time, they are quite competitive about returning.”

“Thank you,” said Agnese Ozolinsh in a sweet solemn voice, and her eyes closed and her head sunk low as she vacated her body.

Snapping her head back up, speaking in a fast unusually high pitched tone for her age, she said, “L! M! Zero! Five! Two! Epsilon! Three! Delta! Eight! Sigma! One! Phi!” paused for a breath and continued, “I am Lucas Morales.”

“Welcome back from Purgatory, Lucas,” said Iona O’ Quinn. “We received your death notice six days and a half days ago. According to Ammit’s correspondence with the Bureau of Death Management, your soul entered Purgatory through a portal not far from a bunker in Colorado that imploded. An investigation has been started by the International Department of Magic and Public Relations because four hundred of Ammit’s Spawn were summoned there, and one died. The body count has not yet been made; the investigation has only recently begun. According to Ammit’s reports, none of the human souls except for yours appeared in Purgatory; all other souls had been devoured automatically by the Spawn that were summoned.”

“I do not remember anything. It all happened so quickly.” said Lucas Morales.

“That is fine,” said Iona O’ Quinn, “we will call you back after you get comfortable with your new body and are ready to talk more about what happened. While we are on the subject of your

new body, just think of your body like this: women parts are just like men parts, only inside out. You had an outie; now you have an innie. Call me if you need help readjusting.”

“Anything else I should know or do?” said Lucas Morales.

“Yes, I almost forgot!” Iona O’ Quinn turned to her computer and looked up Agnese Ozolinsh’s medical records. “According to Agnese Ozolinsh’s medical records, she has not yet entered menopause. So please, I beg of you. Call me when your time comes; I would hate for you to freak out and pass out because of a natural bodily function. Not enough people have frank discussions about their bodies. My daughter thought she was cursed when it first happened and began hyperventilating.”

“Anything else I need to know about women?” said Lucas Morales.

“Well, we cannot keep going around calling you Lucas Morales in that body, can we?” said Iona O’ Quinn, and she tucked her hand beneath her desk and pulled out a big leather bound book with all the names in the world, so far. “Here is the Book of Names,” said Iona O’ Quinn, and she turned the book around and pushed it to where Lucas Morales could read it.

Lucas opened the book with his frail hands, flipped through it and chose a name.

“I would like to be Frantisko Biskup,” said Lucas Morales, smiling because he knew that name could go either way.

“Sure,” said Iona O’ Quinn as she recorded Lucas Morales’s request on her computer and sent it to the Bureau of Living Resources for their record keeping.

Her computer beeped and it spit out a sheet of paper with Lucas Morales’s new information.

Iona O’ Quinn read the paper and told Lucas, “Your name is now officially Frantisko Biskup. Your new government issued id is f, b, zero, five, two, epsilon, three, delta, eight, sigma, one, phi.” A light flashed from a hidden camera at the help desk, taking a picture of Frantisko Biskup, and Iona’s computer printed out a new id card for Frantisko Biskup.

“As per the Bureau of Death Management’s protocols, for your situation, all of Agnese Ozolinsh’s property is now entitled to you, Frantisko Biskup, because she did not have a last will or any heirs to her legacy. Also, all of your assets from your previous life as Lucas Morales will now be transferred to your total assets under your new name, Frantisko Biskup,” said Iona O’ Quinn.

“Thank you darling,” said Frantisko Biskup, trying to be a polite elderly woman.

“You are doing so well already,” said Iona O’ Quinn, and she picked up the phone to call a taxi for Frantisko Biskup. *It would be such a shame for someone who just returned from Purgatory to get killed on their first day back*, she thought. *He or she will need some time to adjust, maybe a lot of time, because Frantisko might not understand his or her limits yet.* “Hello, this is Iona O’Quinn from the Bureau of Death Management. We just got a new arrival from Purgatory. He or she is the sole survivor of the Colorado incident. I would like to place an order for a taxi right now and a caretaker.” She put the phone down.

“A taxi is on its way to pick you up, Frantisko, and take you to either your old apartment or your newly acquired apartment,” said Iona O’ Quinn.

“Aw. how kind of you my dear,” said Frantisko.

“I forgot to ask you. What gender pronoun would you like me to call you?” said Iona O’ Quinn.

“Call me ta,” said Frantisko. “I do not feel like identifying myself as any gender just yet.” It was new for tam because ta had never felt this way before. For tam, it was a completely different experience. Ta had always ended up in a man’s body each time he returned to earth.

Looking towards the glass revolving door of the Soul Redistribution Center, Iona O’ Quinn saw Frantisko’s taxi arrive.

Unlatching the gate to her booth, Iona O’ Quinn stepped out from behind her desk, crossed her booth, grabbed Frantisko’s cane and walked tam down the stairs and to the yellow taxi. She opened the door for tam, gave tam tas cane and closed the door.

Screw being a proper lady, thought Frantisko as ta propped tas legs up on the back of the passenger seat’s head rest.

“Taxi driver, take me to the residence that was formerly Agnese ozolinsh’s,” said Frantisko.

Ta then undid tas paisley bandana from tas hair, threw the bandana onto the floor of the taxi and took a nap.

Komodo dragon licking his right cheek, rubbing his blonde facial hair up and down, Simon woke up from coma with a hard blackish-brown scab covering his left temple. “Alright honey,” said Simon. “Hehe! Stop! That tickles!”

The komodo dragon kept licking Simon’s cheek, and he kept giggling. Although it had annoyed Simon because he preferred to actually be kissed, Tony had done the exact same thing to Simon when he was alive. Simon gazed into the komodo dragon’s black eyes and smiled wide.

“Who’s a good boy?” said Simon, and he expended some of the energy he had absorbed from the rocks in the food forest to heat his body up high enough to kill the bacteria in the komodo dragon’s saliva. The heat warmed up the komodo dragon even more making him rest even heavier ontop of Simon’s chest.

“Oof! Somebody needs to lose some weight,” said Simon. “You seem to have gotten a little pudgy from all the naughty chickens you have eaten. Haven’t you?”

Using some of his energy, a green bubble of light popped out of Simon’s mouth, allowing him to speak to the komodo dragon.

“Hey buddy. I know I must be nice and cozy for you to rest on, but I really need to go. Would you mind stop licking me and get off?” said Simon.

Retracting his tongue, the komodo dragon said, “Fine, endotherm! Hog all the heat, why don’t you!” He walked swish swash, body swaying from side to side, as he walked forwards ontop of Simon, dragging his hefty scaly belly across Simon’s face and slapping Simon’s right ear with the end of his tail. Then, he walked past a prickly black locust tree with short thin deep brown pods while it was busy fixing the nitrogen in the soil. Beside the black locust tree was a honey locust tree with long thin spikes protruding from its trunk and long deep brown to black seed pods dangling from its branches.

Simon placed his hands beside his hips, bent his elbows and lifted his upper body off of the ground. He did not feel that tired; the rocks had provided ample energy to heal his wounds, kill the bacteria from the komodo dragon, and allow him to talk to it.

The wind drifted past and pleasantly tousled his short blonde hair, reminding him of the task that he had before him.

Simon jumped up, springing back into action like a tin soldier boy, and continued to, heading North, follow the wind that rustled the leaves in the food forest.

A bluejay flew over Simon’s food forest and saw that Simon was one klick away from the Great Baobab Tree. Avocado, pluot, walnut, hazelnut, cherry trees, and many others that made up the Circle of Feastings grew up encircling the Great Baobab Tree thrusting their branches high into the air to honor its life giving properties and caring nature. In times of drought, the Great Baobab Tree went salvo into production mode to summon insects which summoned the woodpeckers. As the woodpeckers drilled holes and nests into the Great Baobab Tree, water spewed out of its reservoirs and into the soil to restore the life that was most at risk in the food forest. The Great Baobab Tree stood tall with its smooth wide trunk that thrust itself high into the sky, the food forest’s over-story, holding magnanimous dominion over them all. It graciously accepted their praise and kept its sturdy stock body firm and filled with water at all times. When all is normal, as it was today, the Great Baobab Tree stretched its tiny arms out from its stocky body and

spread its branches wide to absorb as much sunlight as possible for producing seed pods. Its flowers, shaped like a vanilla white hairy tennis ball with a tutu ontop, attracted the attention of hungry insects and fruit bats alike.

Plop! Splat! Thunk! The Great Baobab Tree dropped several irregularly-shaped round pods, about the size of footballs, from its branches which landed on the food forest's floor and began rolling downhill in Simon's direction.

Simon was steadily walking up the hill toward the Great Baobab Tree and past a Sandbox Tree (i.e. Monkey No Climb Tree) covered with short spiky bumps which protruded from its deep beige trunk. Simon looked ahead and saw the baobab pods rolling down the hill and bumping into rocks; he was less than half a klik away from the Great Baobab Tree. Without too much of a hassle, he paced his journey, slow and steady, past the Circle of Feastings, and reached the Great Baobab Tree slightly winded.

Simon did not have to expend his energy to cast a spell to listen and talk to the Great Baobab Tree, for it was magical in its own right. Simon cast his right hand high into the air and waved to the Great Baobab Tree to get its attention. The Great Baobab Tree did not notice. Too much was going on in the food forest that it had to watch over. *That did not work*, thought Simon, and he put his picture of Tony and himself in the front pocket of his pink button down shirt. Then, he took off his moccasins and walked up face to trunk of the Great Baobab Tree, yellow lights pulsating from the palms of his hands and feet, placed his sticky hands and feet onto the Great Baobab Tree's smooth light brown trunk and began to climb.

He was about forty-five feet up the Great Baobab Tree's trunk before it noticed him. At this point, Simon's chest was heaving up and down from the physical exhaustion climbing that high up in the air. *It was nice*, thought Simon. He was not far from breaking the canopy of the food forest. He could almost see the extent of his food forest and homestead, if he was a few feet higher up.

Vibrating, the Great Baobab Tree alerted Simon to its presence. *Finally*, Simon thought.

A hole opened up in the Great Baobab Tree's trunk and emitted a teak-colored ray of light that hit Simon between the eyes.

"What is it, Simon" said the Great Baobab Tree, slightly impatient. It had other things to do. The food forest was bustling with activity and needed its attention.

"I am looking for the living statue of Brahma that was beside you ten years ago. Do you perhaps know where it wandered off to? Any recent sightings?" said Simon.

“I have not seen that statue for a long time,” said the Great Baobab Tree, “but I have heard through the mycelium network that the statue of Brahma is meditating in the East by the sun-traps.”

“Thank you,” said Simon, and as the hole in the Great Baobab Tree closed, the teak light faded from Simon’s head.

He decreased the stickiness of his hands and feet and gently slid down the Great Baobab Tree, tickling its trunk. The Great Baobab Tree felt good. *Rain massages never felt this good*, thought the Great Baobab Tree. *Simon should visit more often*, it thought.

Simon’s butt hit the ground, and he laid back with his legs open towards the Great Baobab Tree. *That was quite tiring*, he thought. Thwunk! A pod had dropped from over ninety feet in the air from the Great Baobab Tree’s highest branches and made a nice round indentation in the ground to the left of Simon’s hip. Inscribed in the pod were the words, “Eat up! Come back soon!”

Simon grabbed the pod, read it, and smashed it hard on a nearby rock. The pod broke. He let blue light bubble from his hands as he hydrated the pulp of the baobab pod. He scrapped his hands into the pod and began eating. *Not bad*, Simon thought. *A little gritty and sour. Very dense fruit.* It was chocked full of calories and antioxidants which energized Simon and made him feel happy.

He left the baobab seeds and pod shells on the ground to decompose in place. He got up, put his moccasins on, and started walking East towards the sun-traps.

Upon reaching the Circle of Feastings, Simon unbuttoned his pink shirt and tied together a knapsack to carry food for his journey. He walked from tree to tree collecting their nourishment- hazelnuts, mangoes, dragonfruit, walnuts, seabuckthorn, honey locust pods, and many other tasty morsels- in case he would need extra energy for one reason or another.

After leaving the Circle of Feastings, Simon pasted another Sandbox Tree and picked up a few of its seedpods and stored them in his right shorts pocket in case an improvised weapon was necessary. They looked like over-exaggerated light brown pumpkins, but their size betrayed their power. If Simon hydrated the seedpods, they would break apart sending the seeds away at speeds of over one hundred fifty miles per hour.

He continued walking, enjoying the speckled light and gentle breeze that touched his face and chest and arms. It was beautiful.

He pasted a walnut tree that was encircled by mulberry, cherry, and gooseberry trees. The cherries and mulberry cherries proved to be beneficial because they both tolerate and moderate the effects of the walnut tree’s toxic root exudation- juglone. Between the trees surrounding the walnut tree were patches of comfrey that accumulated and released nutrients for the other plants

to use. As Tony would have told him, Simon thought *this is a lovely walnut guild*. The plants worked together just as Tony and Simon had while they lived together, but this time, Simon did not cry. He smiled.

It was a little odd not knowing where everything was; it showed their difference in interests. Tony was the one who usually worked on the food forest and brought the bounty inside while Simon was busy just outside the house butchering the livestock or inside the house preparing the meals and doing the laundry. Simon was a good chef. He could make a mean crème brûlée and knew various methods of preparing food- drying, smoking, sautéing, canning, etc. He could use a cast iron skillet with ease and never got anything stuck on the pan. He could even use a parabolic solar cooker, a double-chamber cob oven, and rocket mass heater. Whenever, Tony got hurt, Simon would gather the right herbs from their herb spiral and tell him stories and folktales about the uses of the herbs as he healed Tony's wounds. *Using magic on flesh wounds was a waste*, Simon thought. At nights, Simon liked to pick up the ukulele and sing Tony songs that he had learned from far and distant lands during his off time from his government jobs, company jigs, and his independent studies on the cultures of disappearing native tribes. He wanted to preserve their cultures. He wanted to stop what had happened when the gods had fought wars against each other- the loss of a way of life, the loss of knowledge and heritage- from ever happening again.

On the other hand, Tony was the designer, biochemist, and agroecologist. He liked to plant the plants, spread the mushroom spores, create the swales and berms for controlling the flow of water on their homestead, make the hugelkultur mounds, put all the elements of his designs into perfect harmony on the landscape that surrounded their homestead. However, he always remembered to keep pockets of land (zone fives) untouched so that he could learn nature, or Gaia if she had survived the Great War. He related his hobby as an integrative ecosocial designer (i.e. permaculture designer) to that of a composer; when the right species and design elements were put in the right place with regard to their social and physical surroundings, he could make a productive system that created everything they needed. It had served them well throughout the years.

About a fourth of a klick away, Simon saw, through the trees and bushes, the small shiny statue of Brahma sitting at the eastern end of a sun-trap's pond. The sun-trap's pond was south-facing with trees and shrubs on all sides but the south. It absorbed the heat and light of the sun providing a warmer microclimate than the rest of the food forest for organisms to live in. A flock of mallard ducks were swimming and splashing around in the water as they caught fish and mollusks, ate insects and their larvae, and devoured arrow arum and white water lily. The ducks were having a ball! *How much more fun they would be in my stomach*, thought Simon as his stomach growled.

He sat on the western end of the sun-trap, laid his pink impromptu knapsack on the ground, gazed to look at the statue of Brahma on the other end, and sat down to eat snacks. He felt pretty cozy where he was. The sun reflecting off of the pond's water warmed his whole body.

He untied his knapsack and grabbed a few orange seabuckthorn berries out and began eating. The seabuckthorn berries tasted really good, kinda like a mixture of tart mangoes, pineapples, and oranges all combined into one. He would have to find that seabuckthorn tree again; *those berries would make for a good jam and immunity booster when fall and winter arrive*, thought Simon. He picked up a black honey locust pod, broke it in half, and squeezed out the thick gooey pulp onto his palms. He licked his hands. They tasted good, kinda like a fig. He picked up a deep pinkish green dragonfruit from his out of his knapsack and pried it open with his fingers, nails digging deep into its thick flesh. Purplish liquid squirted out of the dragonfruit signaling Simon that he could begin peeling off the fruit's skin. Using his fingernails, he peeled the flesh off of the top half of the dragonfruit to reveal its deep magenta fruit speckled with tiny black seeds. He bit into the dragonfruit, feeling the crunchy seeds break between his teeth and the mango-kiwi-pear-ish flavors of the dragonfruit cascaded across his tongue. He finished the dragonfruit, feeling rather contented, and tied his knapsack up, ready to meet with Brahma.

Simon got back up with his knapsack in his left hand and scavenged through floor of the food forest for a recently fallen log. Failing to find one, he had to take the long way around the pond. He walked north along the edge of the sun-trap's pond and let the sun warm his tan back. His right hand moved through the swamp milkweed, bulrush, and cattails that grew along the pond's edge. He grabbed a few cattails and stuffed them into his knapsack for snacking on later.

Turning around the northern edge of the pond, Simon headed south to meet Brahma's statue. *How many times have my ancestors asked Brahma for guidance*, thought Simon. *Maybe if I listened to my own relative's when they were alive, I would know*. But that did not matter anyways. All his relatives had died when he was five years, and the Director of the International Department of Magic and Public relations had stepped in and adopted him. That was part of how he got his job as the Lead Cultural Anthropologist at the Bureau of Population Management.

Officially, his job description required him to study the cultures of people across the globe and input data to be broadcast across the globe to help all the dating services pair people up to make babies. Even after five hundred years, the human race was having trouble regaining its pre-War population levels. It did not help any that people were getting married later in life and obtaining higher educational degrees and more of them. Simon liked this, he valued knowledge, wanted others to do the same, and at his job he would input little pieces of misinformation to make sure the dating services did not work. For example, Simon put in that the proper way to greet people in the Middle East was to give them a thumbs up; that got a lot of tourists in trouble; the locals interpreted that as "fuck-you" and punched the poor ignorant tourists in the face. Simon lost his Winter Festival bonus for that stunt. Nonetheless, he continued giving misinformation for two years until the Bureau of Population Management finally had enough and fired him. On and off, the Bureau of Artifacts hired him whenever they had a particularly nasty artifact that they needed help with. He was thirty-eight at the time and had two years to get married before the Bureau of Population Management would be forced to put him into a relationship.

A year later while visiting England to do a private study on the historical culture of England, Simon had found Tony at Stonehenge and fell in love. Tony was doing a study on the effects of capsaicin from various types of peppers on the growth of native fungi. They had their first honeymoon in Southbank along the Thames river and entered into a domestic partnership in Montana, the base for both of their jobs. Their homestead was located slightly north of Missoula, but the location did not matter. Simon had imbued the Great Baobab Tree with magic while it was germinating so that, in case any of Tony's designs went awry, there would be a protector or mother tree there to keep everything alive and running properly.

Simon bowed approached the statue of Brahma, put his hands palms together in front of his chest, bowed, and greeted Brahma's statue by saying, "Namaste." The little wooden statue of Brahma did likewise. Simon placed his knapsack on the ground to his right by the edge of the sun-trap's pond and sat cross-legged facing Brahma's statue.

"Place your palms, facing upwards onto your knees," said the wooden statue of Brahma. "When I place my hands into your palms, I will connect you to route you and Brahma to a discreet location in the far corners of the Ether to talk. Brahma does not feel safe meeting anyone in person right now. Something did not feel right with the arupa-loka."

Receiving the tiny hands of Brahma's statue in his hands, Simon's eyes rolled backwards, and he woke up beside Tony's body. *The entrance to my mind and body is my lover's body*, thought Simon. *Mhmm, awww.*

All around Simon was sticky fog, and he waited patiently where he was, guarding the entrance to his body while he waited for the statue of Brahma to bring Brahma to him.

Meanwhile, the Bureau of Justice was deep in the bowels of the Rocky Mountains investigating the crime scene that the International Department of Magic and Public Relations's Director had alerted them about. The lead investigator and sorceress, Faiza, was wearing a thick white plastic biochemimagical hazmat suit while carrying the Scythe of Kronos- god of bounded time- in her hands. She had silver ten gallon cylindrical fluid exchange tank strapped to her back that had pipes winding over her shoulders and into the veins on both sides of her neck to supply her with ATP while she used the Scythe. Sweeping the Scythe back and forth with her black eyes focusing its energies, she instructed the Scythe to put everything inside the building back in place as far as the Scythe would allow, eight hours. That was part of the problem; anything that was no longer present in the building could not be put back into its place. So, empty vacuums were created with absolutely nothing inside where the remains were missing. She had her technicians, warlocks, and magicians, dressed in yellow biochemimagical hazmat suits, use the Hand of Jesus to detect any scraps or pieces of biological organisms lying around the reconstructed bunker. Pieces of concrete were moving back into place; strings of lights were assembling themselves together and reattaching themselves to the ceiling. On rare occasions when the Spawn had become engorged after feasting on their victims' bodies and souls, scraps of flesh, eyeballs, and toenails floated into the position relative to the victim when they were devoured. Mostly, the investigators

detected only one or two cells from the victims floating in the air with the Hand of Jesus. The staff collected the specimens and had them bagged and tagged for shipment to the Bureau of Justice's primary laboratory in Minnesota, where they would be processed and analyzed.

Faiza continued to go through the bunker, sweeping the Scythe back and forth and back and forth with her technicians trailing behind her like cute obedient little puppy dogs. More and more rooms and tunnels were reconstructed, and broken metal gates twisted and pulled themselves with great effort back into the cold hard ceiling above. The rooms twisted and turned, slithering through the Rocky Mountains. It was getting warmer. *this bunker must extend on for several hundred clicks in all directions*, thought Faiza. It would be a long investigation.

Faiza got tired of going endlessly down and down the main tunnel of the bunker. It was rather boring. So she stood still, rotated to the right, and swept the Scythe back and forth at what she thought was a side tunnel.

Her intuition was correct. The walls uncollapsed, sending metal gates, light fixtures, and concrete slabs flying upwards and sideways back into place to create a passageway that she could walk through. The lights turned on in the side tunnel as it reconnected with the main tunnel's electrical systems. They had hooked up a generator at the entrance to the bunker. Continuing on for an eighth of a click, Faiza reconstructed the side tunnel. There were not as many body parts or fragments in this section of the tunnel. *Either there were more Spawn at this location, or they were just particularly hungry at this location*, thought Faiza. She chose the former option and meandered through the tunnel according to what was not there. The less biological material detected, the closer she was getting to the epicenter of the crime scene.

Eventually, after taking many turns and traveling a few clicks, Faiza and her team came across a dank room with only one light, two metal operating tables, one cell, and a closed sarcophagus that was emblazoned green with gold, paint, and precious gems. *This is it*, thought Faiza.

She got her team to use the Hand of Jesus to locate the cell, and they carefully placed it into a plastic bag and labelled it "prime victim."

Faiza placed the Scythe down on the first metal operating table and walked over to the sarcophagus to check whose it was. As she kneeled down to get a closer look, the sarcophagus creaked and began to tremor. She stepped back. A little nervous because things had happened like this on previous cases before, killing some of her team members, Faiza slowly got up, backed away towards the second metal operating table and whispered to the second in command investigator, Tondra.

"Toss me the Holly King's Crown, Tondra!" said Faiza.

Tondra removed the Crown, eternally covered in snow, holly leaves, and red berries, from her black bag which she had imbued with the power to be larger on the inside than the outside and

weigh little to nothing- a little trick she learned from a grateful wiccan that she had saved from a serial killer two years ago. Tondra had taught some of the low level magicians at the Bureau of Justice how to do the same with their pockets, wallets, and other portable storage devices. This way the Bureau of Justice's investigative teams always had enough artifacts on hand to deal with all possible scenarios. She tossed the Crown to Faiza, who caught it in her right hand.

Careful to not make any unnecessary noise, Faiza put the Crown onto her head and imagined freezing the sarcophagus and stilling the life within it. Ice rapidly wrapped its way all over the sarcophagus, bringing the temperature inside down to absolute zero on all dimensions. The shudders stopped, and all was still with the sarcophagus. She slowly walked back towards the sarcophagus and tried to read what was written on it.

An atef, white crown with red feathers, was located between the eyes of the sarcophagus's face. A djed, strong criss-crossed backbone, went down the body of the sarcophagus. Remembering her lessons in history, Faiza identified the sarcophagus as that of either Osiris himself or the Guardian of the Heart of Osiris.

She looked around the sides of the sarcophagus to see if any hieroglyphics could be read through the ice.

On the far side of the sarcophagus, facing the back of the room, she found these words inscribed on it, and she read them aloud to her team:

"Here lies the Guardian of the Heart of Osiris, the most recent user of the Heart. Every time he was healed, regenerated, or brought fertility to the land, he sacrificed a bit of his soul to the Heart, until nothing was left to give. At this point, he became the Guardian of the Heart of Osiris. His prime directive and only purpose left in life, what little he had, was to guard the Heart for all eternity and prevent others from gaining it. After four weeks, the Guardian will die without the Heart; that was how he stole it from the previous owner before him. But in between that time, a battle and chase ran on across the planet, and many died as the Guardian hunted down the thief. Here he lies. Let his story be a lesson unto you; the ends do not justify the means."

"Well, there we have it. This is the Guardian of the Heart of Osiris," said Faiza.

"Tondra, may you put the Crown on for me and teleport yourself and the sarcophagus back to the laboratory, please. I sense it has returned to dormancy. I could feel a heart was inside of it. So, I doubt the Guardian is awake. Maybe, it was a booby trap or protective ghost or spell. When we all get back to the lab, we can check the higher dimensions around the sarcophagus with the Eye of Providence." said Faiza.

"Yes sir!" said Tondra, standing straight with her hand held to her head in a salute and a wide smile broke across her face. She liked to poke fun at Faiza every now and then; Faiza had once

served in the Bureau of Warfare and had achieved the rank of Sorceress Prime- second to that of the AUM.

“You can stop your antics whenever you are ready,” said Faiza, growing slightly impatient. “You know, as well as I, that I left the Bureau of Warfare many years ago because I got tired of the way they functioned. A bit too scheduled and regimented, not enough different things going on. War games on Sundays and Fridays. Studies on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. Skill tournaments and workshops on Thursdays. Nothing particularly fun about doing the same thing every week, is there, eh?” said Faiza, and she took the Crown off of her head and threw it to Tondra to catch.

“True, true,” said Tondra as she caught the Crown, “I will see you back at the lab, then.”

Tondra put the Crown onto her head, sitting awkwardly on the plastic hood of her yellow biochemimagical hazmat suit, and she thought of keeping the sarcophagus frozen. She walked quickly past the second operating table to stand beside the sarcophagus. She opened her black bag and pulled out a silver five gallon body fluid exchange tank filled with ATP, two plastic tubes, and two wide needles. She quickly undid two patches on either either side of her neck, connected the tubes to the needles and body fluid exchange tank, strapped it onto her back, and jabbed the needles into either sides of her neck.

Tondra closed her black bag, held it in her right hand, and placed her left hand on the cold icy surface of the sarcophagus. She thought of the warm laboratory with all the equipment and friendly coworkers she met every day and all the happy moments she had of solving the cases. The ground beneath her and the sarcophagus glowed in a rainbow of colors, and light bounced off of the walls like light reflecting off of water. A portal opened beneath her and the sarcophagus, and they slowly sank through the portal like they were falling in quicksand. Tondra smiled again before her head was swallowed by the portal and winked at Faiza. Another portal opened up in the ceiling of a silent laboratory on the thirtieth floor of a nondescript skyscraper in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Tondra and the sarcophagus descended to the floor. She would wait her focusing her energies on keeping the sarcophagus in dormancy, just in case, while the rest of the investigative team finished up their work at the crime scene.

“OK, team!” said Faiza. “Let’s get back to work and finish collecting all the information and samples we can from here.”

Faiza walked over to the first operating table and picked up the Scythe. Her team split into two so that she could walk between them, and she led them skillfully back into the main tunnel. Sweeping the Scythe back and forth, she led the way through the bowels of the Rocky Mountains and deep into the earth. They would go through many body fluid exchange tanks before they reached the end of all the possible pathways, and Tondra would be waiting for them when they arrived, whenever that would be.

Hands moving from t-shirts to pants to skirts to robes, Jun and her gang walked in circles through their apartment's grand closet trying to decide what clothing to wear before going out to the Great Celebration. Each of them was trying to find clothing that would help them channel the power of the artifacts they carried; if they appeased the gods, or what residual fragments of their personality had been trapped along with their powers in the artifacts, it would require less of their energy to use that power.

So, Kai, was looking through the Hawaiian clothing to find something to aid with the using the Canoe of Lono that was in his right pocket. Being a buff tan guy with sapphire eyes, Kai was already set up to appease Lono, a pleasant and sociable fertility and festivity god. *I could wear just the traditional loincloth*, thought Kai, *however, I am not sure how well that would blend in with the crowds in the Great Celebration*. So, Kai exited their grand closet, walked back past the table where they had had coffee and tea, and looked out the window to observe the crowds.

Since the sun was setting and painting the sky shades of pink and red, Kai had trouble distinguishing everyone from each other in the crowd, to find what a casual celebration goer looked like. Catching his attention, a magical tinkerer on the side of the street opposite of his building standing on a wooden pedestal wearing a white robe and wielding a staff was selling his wares with lights flashing from his eyes and smoke pouring out of his ears yelling, "Thunder Bull Gumballs! Fifty cents a piece! Scare your friends, and scar your lovers! Great for parties and curing hangovers! Pop one in, and look 'em in the eyes!" Desperate to get more attention, the tinkerer beckoned a few onlookers and said, "Come on! Do not be shy! Here, try one!" and he gave them each a brown round gumball that emitted a pulsated with an eerie yellow light. One of the onlookers, a five year old boy in khaki shorts and a t-shirt with the words "We Have Won!" above the famous picture of Susanne Braveheart on her mechanical dragon, popped a Thunder Bull Gumball into his mouth, and his eyes flashed like lightening illuminating the ever darkening streets. A few seconds later, gray steam flowed out of the boy's ears forming a miniature cloud over his head. got bigger and bigger until the cloud enveloped the child's entire body, shrouding him from view. Another flash of bright white light emanated from the boy's eyes, breaking through the cloud that surrounded him but not illuminating as much of the streets as the first flash. The gray cloud swirled around the boy, like a hurricane around its eye, and thrust the boy flying high into the air. The gray cloud turned into a phantom bull, and boy landed onto the bull's back. White light flashed from the bull's eyes, brighter than the first flash of light, illuminating almost the entire block ahead of the boy, and the bull charged forward. With the little boy holding on for dear life, it galloped into the sky to avoid running over other Celebration-goers, turned around charging in the opposite direction, descending quickly back to where the boy had been standing a couple of minutes ago. The gray cloud disappeared, and the boy was just standing there wide-eyed looking at the tinkerer. It took a moment. The tinkerer had done a good job making his product, and his customer was more than ready to buy. The little boy turned around and called his mommy, a tall strong woman dressed in a shiny green dress that flowed down and outwards from her body, to come.

“Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!” said the boy, tugging on the bottom of her dress, making the charms on her leather belt jingle.

“Did you see that? Did you just see what I did?” he said. “Wasn’t that amazing? Please! Please!”

Bouncing up and down, the boy said, “I’ll be good while you are out having fun during the Celebration if you’ll buy some of the Thunder Bull Gumballs for me! Please! Please!”

Looking down at her child, she thought. *It would be easier to visit the museum exhibits and special educational events that the International Department of Magic and Public Relations hosted if I did not have to him around with me all the time.*

“OK!” said the mom, and the boy and the tinkerer both smiled. “Give me a two hundred of those Thunder Bull Gumballs,” said the mom.

She bent over and lifted her green dress up to pull off her left platform shoe which was painted a bold hue of green. She flipped the bottom of the shoe upwards, and undid the latch that held her money in the platform shoe’s hidden compartment. She pulled out a hundred dollar bill, redid the latch, and quickly put her platform shoe back on.

Meanwhile, the tinkerer bent over and undid the hatch to the storage space inside his wooden pedestal and pulled out a one hundred count bag of Thunder Bull Gumballs. Then, he redid the latch and gave the mother the bag, and she gave him one hundred dollars. They both smiled, her a little bit less than she did. Parting with money was rather tough business.

She knelt down onto one knee and grabbed one of her child’s hands and held the bag of Thunder Bull Gumballs in the other hand. She pulled the key to her apartment building out of a compartment in her belt along, and she removed a tiny silver eye charm from the right side of her belt.

Turning her boy’s palm upwards, she placed the key and the silver eye charm in her boy’s hand.

“This charm will hide you from view of anyone with ill-intent. Be safe, and go home,” said the mom.

Her little boy closed his palm and stretched out his other hand open impatiently waiting for his candies.

“Yes, mommy! Can I have the Thunder Bull Gumballs now? Can I?” he said.

“Yes, you may,” she said and handed her child the bag of magical gumballs. Not letting go of the bag just yet, she said, “Now promise me that you will go straight home and stay there until I return. You know what to do to contact me, right?”

Tired of his mom's lecture, the boy said, "Yes, mom. I will go straight home, and if I ever need you or are in trouble, all I have to do is hold onto the apartment key real tight and think of you. You will be there right away, no matter what." He sighed.

"May I go now?"

"Yes, now go! Run! Run as fast you can! I Lock the door and set the alarms across all dimensions after arriving home. Contact me when you get there, so that I know you arrived safely!" she said.

Her child ran through the dense crowd, pushing and shoving people out of his way with the bag of gumballs tightly held in one hand and the apartment key and silver eye charm tightly held in the other.

Now that he is gone, I can go to that event I have always wanted to go see: "Survivors and No Shows: A History of the Gods That Got Away and the Ones We Never Saw," she thought.

"Thanks for the candies," she said to the tinkerer, "my boy will have so much fun with them, and thank you for letting me have this night to myself!"

She waved goodbye to the tinkerer, who tossed her a Thunder Bull Gumball for good luck. She caught it and disappeared into the crowd to find the location of her event.

On the side of the street beside their apartment, Kai saw a bunch of men wearing only their briefs courting females that were holding cucumbers- apparently caricaturing Japanese kappas. The men in the group had gelled their hair up into bowls which were filled with water. Their bellies and chests were painted light green, and their backs the rest of their body, including briefs, were painted a darker shade of green. They had used cast a spell a few hours earlier before the Celebration really ramped up that night to make their hands and feet webbed like frogs. The women, looking like geishas, were dressed in kimonos, one red with gold cranes, another with Mount Fuji, another with the first emperor Jimmu on her dress, and had their faces painted white with their hair tied back. Their lips were deep red, eyeliner accented their eyes, and a little red makeup highlighted the far ends of their eyes. They held their wagasas, paper umbrellas, with their left arms, and rested them on their shoulders while they playfully lured the men back and forth dangling the cucumbers with their right hands. The men would walk forward to try and take the cucumbers, but the women would bow forcing the men to bow back to them which emptied the water from their bowl-shaped hair. Playing along with the game, the men stopped moving, frozen in a bow, and waited for the women to fetch some water and refill their hair-bowls so that they could move again and continue the game. The game would only end when the men got the cucumbers, but that would be a while since the females were so polite and kept bowing before they grab the cucumbers from them.

Looking to the left, West where the Sun was setting, Kai saw that the Fufluns, a stocky cheerful Etruscan god of feasts and vitality and fertility, was at the far end of long table with many

dancing, feasting, drinking, and cheerful party-goers. Kai opened his eyes to the higher dimensions to see if Fufluns had been invited from the Beyond or resurrected. Fufluns's magical aura appeared to emanate from his entire body on all dimensions instead of just one location in the body like the gods whom were resurrected to help with the Great Celebration. So, he had been granted a three week permit by the International Department of Magic and Public Relations to return from the Beyond to help with the Great Celebration. *A little unusual*, thought Kai, *but then again, this is the five hundredth anniversary of the Great War. So, maybe a few of the gods have chilled down and don't feel that hurt about having lost Earth. There is an entire universe out there.*

Fufluns conjured up foods and wines and drinks and delicacies and all sorts of food stuffs that one could only dream about. To keep away the darkness and shroud them all in light, Fufluns had summoned fluorescent shrews to run beneath the long table, around it, and fly through the air performing tricks to entertain the party-goers. There were turduckens and raspberries. There were copious amounts of champagne flowing from ever-lasting bottles. Century eggs and bowls of udon were steaming hot on the long table; bowls borscht, a bright red beet and beef soup, went straight down the middle of the table; beside the bowls of borscht were bowls of rote grutze, a fruit pudding made of strawberries, cherries, red and black currants, and raspberries, saturated with cream. Plates of grilled chambo, a tasty fish, served with groundnut powder and cassava leaves were scattered along the long table. Bowls of tomatillo salsa verde with piles of scoop chips were sprinkled between deep red bowls of borscht and rote grutze. Reuben sandwiches- two slices of pumpernickel bread stuffed with sauerkraut, corned beef, swiss cheese, and Russian dressing- dotted the edges of the long table. Spiny durians, emitting a putrid smell, were cracked by adventurous party-goers who discovered its wonderful heavenly currant-like taste. Spheroidal orange kumquats, a fruit native to China with a taste between that of a clementine and lime, were located here and there on the long table, making it all the more colorful. As the part-goers would discover, the flesh of the kumquat was sweeter than the sour insides of the fruit. Golden goblets bubbly ginger ale were interspersed on high tables that surrounded the long table. Around the high tables for people to sit on and get drinks from were large kegs of dandelion wine. What was not at the table would be provided to everyone in time. As people danced and ate around the long table, they made special requests for food and beverages from their homelands or places they dreamed of visiting, and Fufluns just smiled, gulped down a few glasses of jackfruit cider, chuckled making his hefty man boobs jiggle with glee up and down, and he conjured more food and drinks to keep the party going.

There was an advantage to inviting living gods to help with the Great Celebration instead of resurrecting gods that were slain during the Great War. For example, Fufluns was not just in Upper Manhattan having a good time; he was in about five million other places having an equally good or better time. Whereas Saule, who was resurrected to help with the Great Celebration, was in Lower Manhattan partying to her heart's content and doing the same in about five hundred thousand other places around the world. Compared to Fufluns, her personality was a little drab, kinda what happens when you die and get stuffed inside an artifact for five hundred years: one's mind and powers weaken.

Some of the male and female party-goers at Fufluns long table shirts on on. Some did not. Some guys were kissing each other. Some girls were kissing each other. Some guys were kissing girls, and some people were kissing no one. While others were kissing Fufluns's hands, some other people were kissing thin air, a rather awkward thing to do, but nonetheless amusing for Kai to watch. Everyone was having a good time; Fufluns had made sure to enchant his drinks and beverages to teleport people to their beds whenever they got drunk. He did not wish to get banned from helping out with future celebrations, for he was having quite a good time.

Kai had enough fun for now and went back inside to go pick out his outfit. *Maybe I can wear my traditional Hawaiian loincloth after all*, thought Kai. *Everyone seems pretty loose about clothing, and no one I can tell has complained about it.*

Kai went past the kitchen table, passed the light switch and turned it on, illuminating the room, and returned to the grand closet.

He passed Gorica, Aucaman, Kojo, Betje, and Jun who were closer to the entrance by clothes that covered more of the body than what Kai was going to wear. The clothing was organized by how much of the body it covered, the more it covered, the closer to the door it was.

Kai undressed in the closet, comfortable with everyone, and put the Hawaiian loincloth on. He went to the far end of the closet to look in the accessories section for a small waist pouch that he could sling around his waist to hold his Canoe of Lono.

Gorica, a fair-skinned medium height curvy woman with hazel eyes, was near the entrance of the grand closet looking for a black dress that would coordinate well with her Mask of Zorya and also appease Zorya, a goddess of midnight. Gorica was trying to decide between a plain black sarafan, kind of like a long pinafore, and a shiny black kokoshnik- headdress- or a black sarafan embroidered with yellow thread the constellation of Ursa Minor which wrapped around the dress and a silver crescent-moon-shaped kokoshnik.

“Jun!” called Gorica, “Which one of these do you think makes me look nicer?”

She placed the pitch black Mask of Zorya on her face and held the two sarafans and kokoshniks in either hand.

Jun, a tall lanky Chinese woman, turned away from the Egyptian seblehs, long loose robes that cover the entire body, she was looking at looked and looked at what Gorica was holding up in either hand and carefully thought about which one would appease what was left of Zorya the most.

“I like the crescent-moon shaped kokoshnik and constellation sarafan,” said Jun.

“I knew that one was prettier! Wearing all black to the Great Celebration would be such a Baba Yag-ing downer, worse than being eaten for dinner in her walking chicken house,” said Gorica.

She turned around and put the black sarafan onto a coat hanger and hung it on the grand closet’s long clothing rack. Not quite as comfortable as Kai, Gorica ran out of the grand closet to find the bathroom and change into her outfit.

Aucaman, a fair-skinned Native American man with high cheekbones and glowing amber eyes, a few feet away from the entrance to the grand closet door picking out clothes. He had the Pebble of Kwatee which contained some of the powers of Kwatee, a god of improvement and transformation. The lights flickered a bit, and the sound of water rushing through the pipes could be heard. Aucaman tilted his head back and sighed. Gorica was taking a shower; she had taken one just the other day when they were getting ready to steal the Heart. *Can’t that girl give it a break*, thought Aucaman. *One day, she is going to wash off all of her skin; then, where, oh where, would she be?* Aucaman chose a white deerskin skin shirt, light brown leather pants, and gray moccasins to wear. Not that he was uncomfortable, but that he did not trust them, Aucaman walked slowly out of the grand closet to find the half bathroom and change in there.

Looking at the dashikis, long colorful shirts, and grand boubous, full-length wide sleeved robes, Kojo, a shy medium-sized handsome lean African man with a nice goatee, tried to choose something that would match his green Eleke, sacred necklace dedicated to Elegua- an African trickster god of crossroads and opportunities. The dashiki that Kojo was looking at had a green background with red, orange, black, and white stripes forming the border and trim along the bottom, sleeves, and neck of the dashiki. It was beautiful. Equally as stunning, Kojo was looking at a green grand boubou that had gold and white stitching swirling and slashing its way in an intricate formation across and around and up and over the cloth. Opting for something more comfortable in case they would have to run through the crowds in the Great Celebration, Kojo chose the green dashiki along with a matching dark green kufi- cap- and light green pair of pants. For his feet, Kojo chose brown leather sandals. Out of respect for the two women in the closet, Jun and Betje, Kojo exited the grand closet to find a bedroom to change clothes in.

Betje, a small rotund Dutch woman with gray eyes, had the Gjallarhorn, Heimdallr’s horn to signal Ragnarök, strapped with a leather belt to her waist. She was deciding color of hangerock, apron-skirt, and linen shift to wear. She could wear a beige shift and a green hangerock with silver brooches, a green shift and a brown hangerock with gold brooches, or yellow shift and blue hangerock with bronze brooches. She turned her head to look at Jun, trying to decide whether to ask for her advice or not. Then, she turned back to herself and decided she would wear green shift and brown hangerock with gold brooches. *This should please Heimdallr*, Betje thought. She left the grand closet to change clothes, leaving Jun and Kai all by themselves.

Thump, squish, thump, squish, the Heart of Osiris was content where it was inside of Jun’s snake leather bag which rested beside her right leg.

Jun patted the bag, jostling the Heart a little bit and decisively chose a blueish green sebleh with gold trim and a jade necklace to wear. Since Kai was still in the closet trying to find a waist pouch, Jun left the closet, bringing her snake leather bag with her. She closed the door to the closet gently, as to not disturb Kai's thoughts, and changed clothes in the master bedroom.

After doing so, she returned to the high table at the kitchen, resting her snake leather bag by her feet, and made a cup of green tea to drink while waiting for everyone else to change into their artifact appropriate clothing.

Kai was the first to finish. He had decided on a small blue flowery waist pouch. He sat at the high table, to the left of where Jun had placed her snake leather bag. Kai ran his fingers through his short cropped black hair that was spiked up from the crown of his head to his forehead.

"Can we just get on with it?" asked Kai. "They are taking a while changing."

"You will have to patient," said Jun, stirring her green tea in the kitchen. "All of the artifacts are necessary which means all of them are necessary, too."

"They could be a little quicker," said Kai.

"Not everyone wears just a loincloth to the Great Celebration," said Jun, and she walked out of the kitchen to sit beside Kai at the high table.

"Have you seen the people outside?" asked Kai.

"I have seen many people outside in many places, Kai," said Jun. "I have been to many Great Celebrations in the past."

"Is this year special?" said Kai.

"In a way, it is special," said Jun. "This is the five hundredth anniversary of humanity's victory in the Great War."

"How does five hundred years make it special?" said Kai.

"Things become more valuable with age," said Jun.

"Kinda like my aunt, eh?" said Kai.

"Yes and no," said Jun. "If you put your aunt in a nursing home, probably not. If you got your aunt a pleasant caregiver and come to visit her often, then yes. However, momentous historical events have a special place in people's hearts. Stories and songs are written and pasted down

from generation to generation, gaining or losing fame in the process. The Great War was one of those that gained a lot of fame, maybe some infamy along the way, too.”

“How so?” asked Kai.

“The Great War was humanity’s final stand against the gods. They had defeated the gods with advanced technology and science and powerful magic. They could not do it with magic alone because only the gods know the Forbidden Spells of Power. To the gods’ detriment, they had not shared their knowledge of the spells equally, leaving the hordes of minor gods at a distinct physical and magical disadvantage. Although the humans lacked the knowledge of the gods, their bodies had the same potential as the bodies of the gods. Susanne Braveheart the AUM, at the time, would be considered on level with Kronos or Vishnu, two of the highest tier gods in the known universe. No one in human history has yet come to be as powerful as Yggdrasil, the supreme creator god. However, there are tales that the arupa-loka, the stuff of everything and nothingness, may create something stronger one day. Even Yggdrasil is at the hands of the arupa-loka. There are whispers amongst the historians and archaeologists that many people who fought in the Great War had secretly despised the war effort but fought, nonetheless. They think something happened, like war crimes or what not, but no evidence has surfaced.”

“You are quite the storyteller,” said Kai.

As Kai had spoken, Betje, looking as dashing as ever in her green shift and brown hangerock with gold brooches. The Gjallarhorn was still strapped with a leather belt around Betje’s considerable waist.

Kai and Jun looked at Betje, impressed with how well she pulled that outfit off. She looked quite lovely, but then again, Betje was always good at making the most of her body and being happy with it.

She smiled at them and said, “What are you all looking at?”

“Nothing,” muttered Kai.

“We were admiring how nicely you dress and how well you coordinated your outfit to match the Gjallarhorn,” said Jun.

“Why thank you,” said Betje, almost blushing. Her gray eyes shined as she smiled.

“Now, you might want to do something about the Gjallarhorn,” said Jun. “It is rather conspicuous where it is right now. Too obvious, too too obvious.”

“I guess you do have a point,” sighed Betje, a little disappointed. “Do you have any charms in your leather bag to help me?”

“How did you know about those?” said Jun, slightly taken aback by what Betje knew.

“Well, you see, when you close your mouth and pay attention, you hear more,” Betje said and giggled a little. *Being small has its advantages*, thought Betje,

“You didn’t go rummaging through my bag without my permission before we stole the Heart of Osiris, did you?” said Jun.

“Golly no! You probably have that thing booby-trapped with wards and spirits,” said Betje.

“Actually, to be correct, I know you have I booby-trapped with wards and protective spirits.”

“You never cease to amaze me,” said Jun.

“Well, it was not just me. I had the help of the Gjallarhorn. Not only can I blow the horn to create diversions, I can also use it to hear things far away or within,” said Betje.

“If you are reading my mind,” said Jun, “I am going to kill you!” She got off of her chair, sending it screeching backwards.

“Calm down,” said Betje. “When was the last time anyone has gotten through your defenses?”

“The last time I fell for a girl who dumped me for someone else three years ago,” said Jun.

“I don’t mean those defenses, silly,” said Betje. “I mean your mental defenses.”

“She kinda did get through my mental defenses. She tricked me.” said Jun.

Betje grabbed the Gjallarhorn off of her leather belt, walked calmly up to Jun, and grabbed Jun’s hand and placed it there for Jun to use.

“Go ahead,” said Betje. “Put it by your ear and try to see if you can hear your mind.”

“I don’t hear anything,” said Jun when she placed the Gjallarhorn by her ear. She tried the other ear, but the result was the same.

“That is right!” said Betje. “Your mind is sealed, as you have always had it. How can I read your mind when it is sealed?”

“You can’t.” said Jun.

“That’s right!” said Betje. “Now give me back the Gjallarhorn, Jun.” Betje stuck out her right hand, palm open, waiting expectantly.

“Could I read other people’s minds?” said Jun.

“You could if you wanted to,” said Betje, “but that is mine. I won’t let you.”

“Fine,” said Jun.

Content that she knew her mind was safe, Jun handed Betje back the Gjallarhorn and pulled her seat back up to the high table to sit down.

“Ahhem!” coughed Betje. “What about the charm to disguise my Gjallarhorn?”

“Sorry about that,” said Jun. “You got me a little worked up.”

“Yes, a little,” said Betje.

Jun picked up her snake leather bag off of the floor and placed it in her lap. She opened it, pushed the Heart aside and unzipped an inside compartment pouch and pulled out a small bronze eye-shaped charm.

“Here is the charm,” said Jun as she handed it to Betje. “Just donate some of your energy to the charm, think about what you would like the Gjallarhorn to look like on all dimensions, and then put it somewhere on your person. It only works in a close vicinity to the chosen target.”

“Thank you,” said Betje. A burst of gray light released from Betje’s hand and was absorbed by the charm. She thought about a small white and black and brown cow horn, and the Gjallarhorn turned into such on all dimensions Betje could think it into. Although the Gjallarhorn’s true form was pretty large, it would only occupy the amount of space of the small cow horn and look like a cow horn. However, it would still have the functionality of the Gjallarhorn. Betje, then placed the small bronze eye-shaped charm into her right hand hangerock pocket for safe keeping. She walked towards the table, jumped up to get on the chair left of Kai, and scooted her chair up to talk with both of them.

“So, are we almost ready?” said Betje.

“We will be ready as soon Gorica, Aucaman, and Kojo are fully dressed with their artifacts in a discreet location on their person,” said Jun.

“I’m ready,” announced Gorica as she walked and twirled through the living room swaying her hips side to side- between the twirls. She had the Mask of Zorya covering her face, the black sarafan with Ursa Minor on it spreading gently outwards like an umbrella from her body, and the silver crescent moon kokoshnik wobbling on her head.

“How do I look?” said Gorica when she was about a foot or two away from the high table. She spun in place with her arms raised above her heads.

“You look beautiful,” said Jun.

“Mysterious,” chimed in Betje.

“As alluring as Venus,” said Kai sarcastically, and he rolled his eyes and folded his arms across his strong smooth tan chest.

“Sit down, my dear,” said Jun as she patted the seat beside her right. “Let me fix us all some tea while we wait on Kojo and Aucaman.

“Aww, thank you” said Gorica, and she stopped twirling and walked to the seat beside Jun to sit down.

“I would like Ko'oko'olau Tea,” said Kai.

“I'd like Mountain Tea,” said Gorica.

“Get me a cup of coffee, will you?” said Betje. “I do not drink tea.”

While Jun was fixing drinks for everyone, Kojo walked into the room wearing his green Eleke around his neck with a matching green dashiki, light green pants, and a dark green kufi on his head.

He saw Jun in the kitchen preparing the drinks and said, “I'd like a glass of ginger beer if you have any.”

Jun gave him a face.

“What was that for?” said Kojo.

“I don't serve alcohol in this joint,” said Jun.

“Ginger beer doesn't have any alcohol in it,” said Kojo, “It is a fermented beverage that is good for creating a healthy inner microbiome.”

“Cool,” said Jun. “I might have a glass of ginger beer myself, too.

Jun pulled ceramic mugs and herbs out of the cabinets. She got a bag of cocoa beans out of the cupboard.

“I’ll check and see if Lata, our landlady, has any ginger beer. You know how she is into all that fermented stuff. They are some of her diner’s most popular dishes. Easy for her to make and makes enough money to pay the taxes in case some of her tenants forget to pay their dues,” said Jun.

She left the kitchen, walked through the dining room and living rooms, through a hallway, unlocked the door to the apartment and headed downstairs to talk with Lata.

Kojo pulled up a chair to the right of Gorica.

Some loud talking could be heard as Jun bartered with Lata to buy two glasses of ginger beer. The ginger beer smelled good, sweet and a little spicy, and Jun really wanted some. She ended up paying a higher price than she had wanted to; Lata was great at bargaining, but Jun was determined. She thanked Lata, bowed, and ran back up the stairs to with a mug of ginger beer in each hand. She put the mugs down to open the door, picked them up, put them down to close the door, and picked them back up and ran briskly to the kitchen, handing Kojo his ginger beer along the way.

“Thank you,” said Kojo politely, and he lifted the mug to his mouth, savoring its scrumptious taste.

Jun worked hard in the kitchen, mixing herbs, grinding coffee beans, and heating up water in the microwave to prepare the drinks. By the time Aucaman was ready in the living room with his gray moccasins, white deerskin skin shirt, and light brown leather pants with the Pebble of Kwatee in his left hand pocket, everyone was sitting around the high table drinking their tea, ginger beer, and coffee, respectively.

Aucaman walked past the dining room and got a glass of water from the kitchen. He returned to the dining room and pulled up a chair between Betje and Kojo.

Everyone sipped their drinks and glanced carefully at each other knowing what was going to happen next.

Jun finished her ginger beer, set it down, got up pushed her chair back, picked up her snake leather bag and walked out of the apartment, making her sebleh gently flutter as the air disturbed it. She walked downstairs and onto the streets of Manhattan with the Great Celebration going strong.

Ten minutes later, Gorica finished her Mountain Tea, got up, and left the apartment to trail a about a fourth of a klick behind Jun.

Ten minutes after Gorica had left, Kai finished his Ko'oko'olau Tea and filed out of the apartment to follow Gorica with a fourth of a klick between them.

Betje left the apartment ten minutes later with a drop of coffee still left in her mug. She was a fourth of a klick behind Kai.

Kojo waited ten minutes after Betje left before leaving, and Aucaman waited ten minutes after Kojo left before leaving the apartment.

It had taken a total of fifty minutes for everyone to be out of the apartment with a fourth of klick between each of them. This was to disguise that they were all in the same group, just in case someone caught them with an artifact on their person. Possession of an artifact by unauthorized personnel was illegal and punishable by international law.

Having crossed the border between Arizona and Colorado, Faiza was getting tired and needed to finish sweeping the site quicker. So, she pulled out the Orb of Aion- god of unbounded time- from her black bag and a body fluid exchange tank to hand to Viktor, her third in command.

“I want you to use the Orb of Aion and this body exchange fluid tank to rewind everything at the far northern ends of these tunnels,” said Faiza. Almost about to forget it, she pulled the Feather of Quetzalcoatl from her bag and gave it to Viktor. “The Orb will allow you to move objects back into place, but I advise having a partner or two help you use the Orb. Even at my level, I try to avoid using the Orb because it does not recognize time as past, present, and future like the Scythe does. It sees everything as it just is with no differentiation between them. Also, by having two other partners, you can have one think of a way to define the present, the other to define the future, and you to define the past that you are looking for on the site. Otherwise, it would be really hard for you to think of all three at the same time. The Feather of Quetzalcoatl will allow you and your unit to find any biological remains on the crime scene. Now get to it, please.”

“Yes, Faiza,” said Viktor. He grabbed two team members to help him with the Orb- Aram, the fourth in command, and Llewella, the fifth in command,- and called another ten people to follow him, use the Feather of Quetzalcoatl to find any biological remains, and to collect evidence.

Faiza and Viktor’s teams parted ways, she went south, and Viktor went north.

Sitting in the lab room, rather bored, Tondra spun around in a chair making sure not to lose focus or let the Holly king’s Crown fall off of her head. Her biochemimagical hazmat suit crinkled as she moved. It had already been five hours, and she was getting quite impatient with Faiza and the rest of her investigative team.

She stopped spinning and stared at the ice-frosted sarcophagus of the Guardian. It looked interesting with the ice crystals and fractals scattering and breaking the light that hit it. It was pretty. Maybe she could look at it differently for the next few hours. This time, she looked at it like a piece of artwork, instead. *The hieroglyphics appear to be hastily written*, thought Tondra, *and the gold is not as smooth, either. Probably, it has been booby-trapped.* So she sat there,

admiring its beauty, and laid back in her chair. She contemplated what they might find with the Eye of Providence.

After three hours of monotonous searching, collecting, and tagging, Faiza and her team and Viktor and his team finished investigating the tunnels. They had only found one complete body which had been crushed to death by the weight of the tunnels collapsing. All the rest of the evidence was a few of missing limbs, tons of cells, some organs here and there, fifteen sets of teeth, and a few gold and silver teeth. Faiza collected the Orb of Alon, the Feather of Quetzalcoatl, and the Hand of Jesus and put them inside of her spacious black bag. She had to get two of her team Viktor and Aram to hold onto her black bag and stretch it really wide to stuff the Scythe of Kronos inside and closed the bag. She picked her bag back up with her right hand and stood up tall.

“Whew!” said Faiza. “Time to get back to the lab and process all of our evidence.”

Viktor and his team rejoined Faiza’s team, and they walked down the main tunnel and out of the bunker and into the light. They savored the warmth the sun brought them, and stood still for a few seconds.

“Put all the evidence in a pile,” commanded Faiza. “Now, everyone, I want you all to get in a circle around the evidence with me. Place your right hand on the evidence pile and wrap your left arm around the person beside you.” Faiza put her left arm on on Viktor and gripped her right hand tightly to her black bag.

Faiza looked around to make sure everyone was following her orders. They were.

“Now think very clearly of the laboratory, where it is located, and what you do there. Hold that picture in your mind,” said Faiza. The colors of the rainbow started to pulsate everyone’s hands and from the ground beneath and the artifacts. Light bounced off of the of the artifacts, engulfed the investigators, light rippled through the air like waves beating upon the shore, and a portal opened up beneath them. They slowly sank down into the portal.

They are finally here, thought Tondra as she looked up to her right to see a multicolored portal open up above her head. Hurriedly, she got up and pushed some chairs out of the way so that they would land beside the sarcophagus without falling onto anything.

Faiza and her team descended steadily from the colorful portal and landed feet-first on the floor in the same circle that they had disappeared from the crime scene in. The evidence landed on the floor in the same pile it had disappeared in, suspended in place the entire time by their combined magical energies. Faiza’s body exchange fluid tank was almost depleted. She broke from the circle and dismissed her investigative team to begin analyzing the evidence. They quickly removed the needles from their necks that had been connected to their body exchange fluid tanks. After removing the needles they walked by the Well of Dian Cecht, located beside a lab

table, dipped their fingers in, and donated some of their magic to invoke its healing properties. They stacked the needles at the end of the lab table close to the where the Well was. Between the Well and the lab table, they stacked their body exchange fluid tanks. To the right of the needles, they took off their yellow biochemimagical hazmat suits and placed them in a pile. Faiza called to Viktor saying that he would be in charge of managing the team that will be processing and analyzing the evidence, while she and Tondra would handle the Guardian's sarcophagus.

Faiza rested her black bag down beside the sarcophagus and removed the needles from her neck. She walked to the Well, dipped her fingers in, and invoked its powers. Then, she walked around the Well to face the lab table where everyone else had placed their needles and added hers to the stack. She unstrapped her body exchange fluid tank and placed in the pile to the left, and she took off her white biochemimagical hazmat suit and placed it in the pile to the right of the needles.

Faiza walked back to Tondra, who was still in her yellow biochemimagical hazmat suit, and she removed the Holly King's Crown from Tondra's head and placed it onto her own head. Faiza thought about keeping the sarcophagus quiet, and the icy barrier tightened its grip around the sarcophagus with a slight crunch.

Tondra went over to the lab table, removed her needles, used the Well, and placed her biochemimagical hazmat suit and body exchange fluid tank in each other's proper places.

Tondra went back to the sarcophagus and stood beside Faiza. Faiza and Tondra were dressed in standard issue white lab coats with light blue long sleeve business shirts and blue jeans beneath. They both wore black steel-toed shoes like everyone else in the lab. Everyone wore the same thing in the lab.

"How are you?" said Faiza as she turned to face Tondra, her light auburn hair bouncing around her head as it moved.

"Oh, I'm fine," said Tondra. "Do you know how long I have been waiting for you and your team yo get back here? Do you know how long I have been staring at that stupid stinking sarcophagus, focusing the powers of the Holly' King's Crown on it?"

"No, do please tell me," said Faiza.

"I have been waiting over seven hours!" complained Tondra. "Look out the window!" she said, pointing her finger across the lab room.

"Yes, I am sorry," said Faiza, "but I was in the tunnels of the crime scene's bunker and could not see the sun."

"You could have checked your watch!" said Tondra, a little peeved.

“I don’t have a watch,” said Faiza, and sighed.

“Well, get one before the next time you visit a crime scene, will you?” said Tondra.

“Fine, I will,” said Faiza, and she walked to the end of the laboratory, opposite to the windows, and crouched down to open a pitch black safe with a silver keypad. She typed in the password and removed the Eye of Providence- a tiny sandstone pyramid with an eye in it about the size of baseball.

Faiza returned to the sarcophagus and held the Eye of Providence with both hands. She handed it to Tondra.

“Hold the Eye of Providence with both hands and command it to reveal whatever is on or around the sarcophagus one dimension at a time, while I destroy whatever appears,” said Faiza.

“When I let the Crown’s grip on the sarcophagus go, you must scan it immediately,” said Faiza.

“Got it?” asked Faiza.

“Yes, I got it!” said Tondra. “I have been waiting forever to do this.”

Rapidly, the ice retreated from the sarcophagus, and it glimmered as light from the lab’s fluorescent lightbulbs’ shined down upon it.

White light was emitted from the Eye of Providence, and the light moved up and down the sarcophagus. Nothing appeared.

Tondra invoked the Eye of Providence again, and white light moved up and down the sarcophagus. A red blip flashed from the from the atef located between the eyes of the sarcophagus.

An avatar of Nephthys appeared before them. It was humanoid, carried an ankh in its hand, and looked female. She had a staff in the other hand, a red dress on, and a headdress shaped like a house with a basket on top.

A fireball shot out of Faiza’s hands, palms out towards Nephthys’s avatar.

The fire parted around Nephthys and was extinguished as she consumed the oxygen around herself.

“Who wishes to open the sarcophagus of the Guardian of the Heart of Osiris?” said Nephthys’s avatar.

“We wish to open the sarcophagus of the Guardian of the Heart of Osiris,” said Faiza and Tondra in unison.

“What do you plan to do once you open it?” said the avatar of Nephthys.

“We will take a look inside,” said Faiza, trying not to smile because of how easy this was going.

“You may pass,” said Nephthys’s avatar, and she disappeared.

The lid to the sarcophagus opened up slowly, creaking as it went, and the lid fell on the floor with a giant THUD.

Tondra scanned the sarcophagus and Guardian from a distance with the Eye of Providence. Nothing was detected. She tried two more times to double check and got the same result.

“For somebody this important, it is not protected very well,” said Tondra.

“I know! You would think there would be demons and ghosts and wards to protect this thing,” said Faiza.

Together, they walked up the sarcophagus and peered inside. There it was. The Guardian was resting calmly with its arms crossed over its chest, and they could see a heart beating steadily inside its body. Thump, squish, thump, squish, thump, thump, thump.

“Is that the Heart of Osiris?” said Tondra.

“I would expect so, but considering everything we saw at the crime scene, someone went to great lengths to get the Guardian. So, maybe it has been stolen, but then again, if it was, the Guardian would not be in the sarcophagus,” said Faiza. “Let’s check.”

Tondra held the Eye of Providence above the Guardian’s heart, and invoked its powers.

“According to the Eye of Providence, that should be the Heart of Osiris. It is a very powerful heart possessing strong magic. The Eye reported to me that is seventy-five percent sure and cannot guarantee anymore precision,” said Tondra.

“Try again,” said Faiza. “We have to be one hundred percent sure.”

Tondra scanned the Guardian’s heart again.

“The Eye of Providence reported the same results as last time: a very powerful magical heart, possibly the Heart of Osiris, and only seventy-five percent sure,” said Tondra.

“Try it again two more times,” said Faiza.

Tondra scanned the Guardian's heart two more times.

"The Eye of Providence told me the same results and also had a message for you: 'cut it out stupid! I cannot change the results of what I find! They are what they are.' End message," said Tondra.

"Last time I checked, the Eye wasn't so sassy," said Faiza.

The Eye jiggled in Tondra's hands.

"The Eye has another message for you: 'put me somewhere more interesting than a dark vault, and I will be nicer.' End message," said Tondra.

"Oh well, buddy," said Faiza. She walked up to Tondra and yanked the Eye of Providence out of her hands. "You are coming with me," she said and walked to the end of the laboratory with the window.

"See here," said Faiza, "That is the rest of the world, outside."

The Eye of Providence warmed up, hoping that it would get to rest on the windowsill when not in use.

"See that," said Faiza, turning around to point the Eye at the safe located on the other end of the laboratory, and the Eye became cold in fear.

"You are going in there," said Faiza. "You are an artifact. You are dangerous. You are not to be trusted. You are just a tool, and any semblance of a consciousness will be quashed!"

Faiza released a wave of blue light, some of her pure magical energy, from her body which travelled down her arms and flowed into the Eye of Providence. The Eye shook violently and heated up and tried to turn upwards to look Faiza in the eyes, trying to give a look of despair, but her power was too much. The Eye was overloaded by the intensity of her magic and stopped moving and returned back to room temperature.

Tondra just looked at Faiza, mouth agape at the scene that had just happened in front of her. It took a while for it all to sink in.

"How could you have done that?" stuttered Tondra. "You saw it was alive. You interacted with it. How? Why?"

"I told you everything you needed to know when I spoke to it," said Faiza in a stern cold voice.

"That was standard protocol. That is what the Bureau of Artifacts would have done. That is what the magicians and sorcerers would have done in the Great War. That is what Susanne Braveheart

the AUM and her great great great grandson, Simon the AUM, would have done. That is what he does when the government contracts him. That is what they all did and would have done! I did my duty! You should do yours!”

“But...,” said Tondra trying to speak.

“No buts! No interruptions!” said Faiza. “After they slew the gods in battle, they removed the powers of the gods from their bodies and imbued them into artifacts that we can harness. Some of the gods’ personalities were taken up in the process along with their powers. You should not feel sympathy for them. They hurt the human race. They abused the human race for their own benefit!”

Tondra fell silent and walked to the chair beside the sarcophagus to sit down.

Faiza walked to the other end of the laboratory, knelt down, punched the password into the safe, and shoved the Eye of Providence inside, slamming the safe’s door shut. She walked back across the laboratory and pulled up a chair to sit beside Tondra.

“If you are worried about the Eye, it will be okay,” said Faiza. “I only gave it enough power to max out its capacity and put it into a coma-like state. It should be able to consume the magic I gave it properly in a couple of days after it recuperates from the shock.”

Tondra cried a little bit. She hadn’t known that it was alive. None of the artifacts had ever done that with her before, and then her best friend went ahead and hurt it. *It was alive!* thought Tondra. *It was alive, and Faiza killed it.*

Faiza wrapped her left arm around Tondra and pulled her in close for a hug.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” she whispered into Tondra’s ears. “That is what we do here. It is just procedure. I thought you knew about it. Didn’t you read the manual before you received your job post?”

“No! No I did not!” said Tondra. “Who reads manuals?”

“I do,” said Faiza. “If you read the manual when you got your job, we would not be going through this ordeal, and I wouldn’t have to be comforting you right now. Despite being my good friend, deal with it! We have jobs to do.”

Faiza let go of Tondra and got up from her chair. She walked across the laboratory towards the safe and picked up the phone. She called Viktor.

“Hello Viktor! Have you processed all the evidence yet and identified the victims?” said Faiza.

“No, madame. We have only identified the ‘prime victim’ as Doctor Tony, husband of Simon the AUM. As for the other, we have sorted the rest of the remains into two hundred different victims,” said Viktor.

“Thank you,” said Faiza. “On my side, we have successfully opened the sarcophagus of the Guardian of the Heart of Osiris and identified the heart inside the Guardian as the Heart with a seventy-five percent probability of being correct. Has the International Department of Magic and Public Relations called yet?”

“No, madame,” said Viktor. “Why only seventy-five percent chance of being right?”

“The Eye of Providence was being smart with me,” said Faiza. “I had to overload it and put it back into the safe. It will be pretty depressed and angry when it wakes back up. Oh well, it started the whole thing, anyways.”

Lights flashing in the darkness, Frantisko Biskup’s taxi sped through town to find Agnese Ozolinsh’s home. Ta was very tired; it was way past midnight already, and they had been driving around town for what seemed an eternity.

“Taxi driver, anything to drink or eat back here, like water or crackers?” said Frantisko.

“Yeah, check the left and ride car door compartments,” said the taxi driver.

Frantisko searched the the left-hand car door compartment and found a bottle of water and cheddar cheese crackers. Ravenously, Frantisko tore open the pack of crackers and stuffed them in tas face, getting crumbs all over tas fingers and clothing and face. The crumbs got caught the wrinkle ta’s face, making ta look like orange spots had been splattered on tas face. Ta could feel the crumbs in tas wrinkles, and they made ta itchy. Frantisko scratched tas face, dislodging the crumbs which fell onto the floor of the taxi. Ta unscrewed the bottle of water and hastily gulped it down; the crackers had made tam quite thirsty.

Ta gazed out the window of the taxi admiring how much fun the people in the streets were having celebrating the Great Celebration. Ta was jealous. Ta had been able to party hard when ta was in tas own body, but now ta was in a frail older woman’s body. *Oh well*, Frantisko thought.

Lights flashed overhead and nearby. Music could be heard. Tales of days gone by and the Great War which once was were told in the streets. Food and drink were exchanged. Gifts were given. It was a joyous night, the first day of the Great Celebration, and Frantisko wanted some of it. Ta wanted it badly.

“Taxi driver, stop here! I want out!” said Frantisko.

“Why would you want to stop here?” said the taxi driver.

“I want to party,” said Frantisko thrusting tas right arm up into the air, making tas sagging arm skin flap back and forth many times with a resounding swoosh, swoosh.

“Control your bingo wings, will you?” said the taxi driver.

“Thank you. They are my bingo wings, and I will flap them whenever I want to,” said Frantisko. Ta raised tas arms up into the air and shook them hard. Swooshy, swooshy, swoosh, swoosh. Ta opened the window of the taxi, held one of tas arms out the of taxi and let the younger people look at tam as the cold night wind made tas bingo wings vibrate quickly. Swoosh! Swooshy! Swooshy! Swooshy! Swooshy! Swooshy!

“Check out my bingo wings!” yelled Frantisko to the party-goers. “Aren’t they beautiful?” Tas bingo wings flapped like wings of eagles.

“Yeah! Come on out! Woop! Woop! Bingo wings for the win!” yelled the party-goers, thrusting their arms high into air imitating the way Frantisko shook tas arms in the air.

“See! They like me,” said Frantisko smugly to the taxi driver. Ta smiled wide furthering wrinkling tas already well-wrinkled face. “Now let me out!”

The taxi driver stopped the taxi right then and there and let Frantisko out. After letting Frantisko go, he parallel-parked the taxi across the street from where Frantisko was walking. The taxi driver was going to watch from a distance to make sure ta did not get hurt.

Across the street from the taxi driver, strobe lights were pulsing in multiple colors- blues, greens, reds, magentas, whites. They spun around cutting through the air, casting fantastic shadows across the street, making grotesque caricatures of the young party-goers.

“Hey Granny!” said a young female party-goer standing outside, in the epicenter of the strobe lights. Two male bouncers in black leather pants looked at each other and smiled while she talked to Frantisko. *This will be interesting*, they thought.

“Wanna enter Club Cougar?” she said. Frantisko gave the young girl a funny look.

“What do you mean?” said Frantisko, knowing the answer from his expeditions to clubs during his lifetime as Lucas Morales.

“Would you like a look at what kind of people visit our club before coming inside?” she said.

“Why not?” said Frantisko.

“Hankie! Tingle! Come over here. We have a potential visitor,” she said. The two bouncers from the club waked forward to meet her, one English man and one Chinese man walked over to her, their gaits swaggering from side to side. Their muscles were smooth. The Englishman’s chest was fuzzy with hair rippling down from his collarbone, spreading gracefully outwards to engulf his nipples, coming back together into a straight line that blazed down the middle of his abs, circled his bellybutton, and expanded to cover his lower abs before disappearing- cut off by his leather pants. Frantisko looked back up to his face and admired his pretty round well-chiseled face covered with a black five o’ clock shadow. Ta turned tas face to the Chinese man, absorbing every nook and cranny on his smooth white body. His abs were defined and his biceps bulged; his tits were a deep red, slightly pink due to the cold air nipping them.

“Return to your spots, Hankie and Tingle!” she said, waving her arm in the giving a princess wave.

“Do you need a look at some of our visitors before deciding whether Club Cougar is for you?” she said. “Wait, on second thought, let’s just bring them out!”

“Hankie! Tingle! Can you bring out one of our latest visitors?” she said.

Hankie and Tingle swung themselves inside the club, strobe lights turning them two of them into the seeds of rainbows.

After a few minutes, out came Hankie and Tingle with a few elderly gentlemen kissing young ladies, a few elderly women kissing young men, two young men kissing elderly men, a few young women kissing elderly women.

“Here at Club Cougar,” she said, “love is not defined by age or gender. You can be with anyone like, so long as they like you. Feeling better now?”

Frantisko liked what ta saw.

“I do.Ii do very much,” said Frantisko.

“Then, come on! Don’t waste anymore of your time out here in this kind of weather. Warm yourself up inside the club, in more ways than one,” she said.

The horde of lovers, kissing each other, making loud smack-smack sounds, surrounded Frantisko and led ta into the Club Cougar. The strobe lights got brighter and faster as Frantisko entered the club.

As Frantisko entered the club, bars and stools appeared before tam; men and women of multiple age groups and orientations and time periods were dancing in place to the electronic music that boomed from the stereos of Club Cougar.

Behind the dance floor was a big black heavy curtain that absorbed the lights; nothing could be seen behind it. A few couples held hands, parted the curtains and entered inside to not be seen again for about half an hour or less.

Frantisko walked, hobbling a bit on his cane, pulled up a seat at the bar.

“Barman! I would like some bubble tea please, non-alcoholic,” said Frantisko, “I do not need alcohol to have fun!”

Frantisko looked around the bar, wondering if he could have a good time. *It was an interesting sight*, he thought, elderly people dancing to electronic music. *I guess it is no less weird than me being inside this elderly woman's body.*

A busty young woman with a robust figure walked up to the bar and pulled up a seat next to Frantisko.

“Hey Grandma,” she said, “how are you?”

“I do not know,” Frantisko said. “I only just arrived.”

“Why are you not dancing?” she said.

“I can’t” said Frantisko. “Just look at me.”

The young lady looked at Frantisko, saw his dress and cane and sagging chest. *Nothing to be ashamed of*, she thought.

“Really?” she said, “Is it that bad being old?”

“I was young just a few days,” said Frantisko, “but now my joints hurt, my body aches, and I have to go to the bathroom very frequently.” He tried to remember what his parents had complained about to try and make his age seem authentic, to try and turn her away.

It did not work. The club was named ‘Club Cougar’ after all, so that would be rather hard to do.

“Well, have you considered the upsides of being old?” she said.

“What upsides?” said Frantisko, a little shocked that someone his age might know what elderly people can do.

“For one, you have a lot of experience with life,” she said.

“I kind of missed out on the experience thing,” said Frantisko.

“No! No! No, you didn’t” she said. “Your wrinkles are enough to see that you have had a very long life. Tell me about yourself.”

“Barman! Where is my bubble tea?” said Frantisko, waving his right arm up in the air causing the skin flaps to swoosh back and forth in the air like a fluttering flag in the breeze. He was a little uneasy about how quickly he had picked up a date at Club Cougar, almost too easy. *Maybe young people are just too promiscuous*, he thought. *Then again, even I, had more trouble than this picking up men at go-go bars. Although, fishing in bars did not always turn up good catch: the alcohol had made many more problems with my dates than they solved, if any.*

“Put your arm down,” the young woman said. “The barman will be ready when he’s ready. Chill your tits!”

“My tits are pretty hot, as is” Frantisko said. “I could have a heatstroke any time with the atmosphere of this place.”

“Then chill your tits!” she said. “Barman, can we have an ice pack or two for this good woman over here. Her tits are flaming hot.” She smiled while she said that, looking over at Frantisko.

“Don’t call me that!” said Frantisko, a little nervous.

“Don’t call you what? I just said you were a good woman,” she said.

“I am not a woman!” said Frantisko. “I haven’t decided yet. I’ve only been in this body for about seven hours.”

“Your body swapped with an elderly woman?” she said, taken aback.

“Yes! That was what I was trying to tell you the whole time!” said Frantisko. “I don’t know what gender I am right now, and the whole orientation thing is up in the air right now.”

“All the more reason to talk to me,” she said, “I want to hear your story. You see, I don’t come to clubs like this just for the heck of it. I enjoy listening to their stories. That way I can learn from their lives and apply what I like to help make my life better. I don’t necessarily have to agree with them, but it does please me to see that peaceful expression they give me when they know that someone has heard them.”

Walking over to the two of them, the barman said, “Here is your bubble tea, madame,” and passed Frantisko his bubble tea which was orange and creamy with squishy black boba pearls sitting in the bottom of the tall glass.

He knelt down from under the counter, opened a freezer, and pulled two blue icepacks which he rested beside Frantisko's bubble tea as he said, "Two icepacks for the hot tits of your grandma."

Frantisko rolled tas eyes, making tas long hair swish back and forth. Ta picked up the two blue icepacks with one hand, unbuttoned the front of tas bra with the other, and stuffed the icepacks in, and closed tas bra.

"Better now?" the young lady asked while Frantisko sipped tas bubble tea and he icepacks chilled tas tits.

"A little cold now, but nothing is perfect," ta said. "The bubble tea is good. I have not had creamsicle-flavored bubble tea before. Nice flavor, and I have never put icepacks down my chest before, either. Experiencing new things all the time."

"See there is always more to learn," the youthful woman said. "You have been delaying long enough, talk to me. I want to know what is going on with you."

"This body belonged to Agnese Ozolinsh while she had occupied this body," Frantisko said, "and I used to be Lucas Morales while I had occupied my body. However, I was killed in an accident in Colorado, and this was the first body I had the opportunity to occupy. Though, I had not realized its age until now. She had a bright mind and youthful spirit which concealed her age in Purgatory rather well; with a spirit like hers, I do not understand why she would have felt the need to leave for the NetherWorld."

"Maybe she just did not like the state of affairs here," the busty young woman said, leaning her right arm on the bar to face Frantisko completely.

"Must you do that?" Frantisko said.

"Do what?" she said.

"Turn like that towards me," ta said, "it makes me uncomfortable."

"Oh, okay," she said and turned herself back to face the bar and rotated her face to look at Frantisko.

The bubble tea needs a bit more creamer; thought Frantisko, so ta quickly squirted some into tas bubble tea from tas breast, making the young woman look at tam with a surprised expression.

"You seem fine with your new body, from the looks of it," she said.

"Well, I had always wondered what it would feel like if stuff came out of my chest when I was in my original body, and now I know," said Frantisko.

Standing up, rather fed up with Frantisko's antics, she grabbed tas arm and spun tam off of the bar stool, sending tas cane flying. They entered the dance floor with the young woman leading the way. The crowd parted slightly to let them in, and they were swallowed by the crowd that flowed and ebbed to the beat of the music, becoming one with the masses.

She grabbed pulled Frantisko's hand up high into the air, pulling Frantisko onto the balls of tas feet, and she applied tugged on Frantisko's dress making tam spin in place. Tas dress fluttered as tam spun around and around.

"Isn't this fun?" she yelled to Frantisko to make sure ta could hear her over the music. She stopped spinning Frantisko, leaned back, and caught tam in her arms.

Breathing a little heavy and fast, Frantikso said, "Oh yes, this is fun!"

"Now get ready! Freestyle is almost up, we are going to be doing the wobble next," she said. "Do you know how to wobble?"

Strobing lights criss-crossed the dance floor, and the wobble began.

"Here is how it goes," yelled the young woman to Frantisko.

"Forward jump, sway in place three times, backward jump sway in place three times, lean back to the right for four beats, then with your feet leading front, back, step in place one two three, front back, step in place one, two three, then step and sway side to side, one two three four five six seven eight," she said.

"Oh! Oh! Wobble baby! Wobble!" announced the loud speakers.

"And one two!" she said while jumping forward, "three, four," shaking her butt to the beat.

Jumping backwards, she said, "five, six, seven, eight," moving her hips to the beat.

"Come on Frantisko!" she said, "You should know how to wobble! You said yourself that you are actually very young on the inside!"

"But I feel so old!" ta said.

"Cut it out! I saw you raise your bingo wings proudly in the taxi cab!" she said.

"Yeah! I was being crude, lude, and rude!" said Frantisko. "That taxi driver was quite annoying, thinking he knows what's best for me."

She jumped behind Frantisko, grabbing tas arms.

“And this is how we do it!” she said smiling, with her legs up against Frantisko’s and tas arms held tightly, she guided Frantisko through the dance moves.

They jumped forward, swaying their arms, and Frantisko started to gyrate tas hips as she shows Frantisko how to wobble.

They jumped backwards, moving hips back and forth, leaning forward to swing their arms from side to side.

Right to left, they leaned their bodies backwards and rolled their fists in a circle.\

Front, back, step, step, step. They then repeated and side-stepped to rotate themselves to face the big black curtain instead of the DJ.

“What do they do in their?” asked Frantisko.

“You can’t be that stupid,” she said, “what do you think people do when they step inside a behind a black curtain and don’t return for half an hour?”

“Can we go see what they are doing?” ta said.

“Are you sure?” said the young lady.

“Yes,” said Frantisko, knowing the answer but lying because every club did things differently.

“Well, then, let’s go,” she said, and she guided Frantisko through the crowd to the big black curtain.

“Ready to go in?” she said. “Once you go in, I cannot guarantee you will leave the same person you were before.”

“Yes! I am absolutely ready to go inside!” said Frantisko.

Slowly, the young robust woman drew back the black curtain to pulled Frantisko into the dark space with her. Before them, in the shadows, laid another big black curtain, hiding what lay behind it.

Excitedly, they walked into the light, and before them stood Janus, the Roman god of transitions, on a slab of marble. He eyed the newcomers and beckoned them to come forward and sit before him- to join the circle of followers around him.

His two heads were conjoined facing opposite directions, and with them, he could see into the past and the future; however, with some trouble, he was able to turn his neck in such a way that allowed him to properly see the present.

Light radiated from the herbal candles that burned around him.

“What is it that you two would wish to learn from me?” asked Janus, pointing his two hands in their general direction, using echolocation- a skill that he had learned over the ages from his heady disposition.

“Um, we do not know yet,” said Frantisko.

Ta and the young woman joined the circle and gazed at Janus, his long white robe flowing down his lean tan body. He had a short dark brown beard growing out from both heads a bald spot forming at the crown of his heads where they came together.

Janus’s followers bowed their heads and held their hands together, grabbing Frantisko and the young robust woman’s hands, instructing them to join them in the initiation of the ritual. They bowed their heads as Janus lifted his arms up into the air. The cult members chanted slowly to make sure that Frantisko and tas young woman friend would be able to say it with them. Two portals, one blue and one red, opened up to either side of Janus, illuminating the dark room, making it red on one end, blue on the other end, and purple where Janus stood and the cult sat.

Together, everyone’s eyes rolled back, and everyone breathed in air slowly as the visions came to them.

Frantisko’s mind started off in a cloudy state, and the fog rolled out of tas mind bit by bit like expunging the bittersweet memories of youth. Colors flashed and swirled inside his head, an apartment complex appeared, and in it, laid Frantisko snoring with tas dentures on tas bedside dresser. Underneath tam was the young lady ta had just met at the club. This was not what ta had expected to see. The vision disappeared, and ta saw the Rocky Mountains. Ta whizzed through and saw the young pallid body that was once his crushed beneath the rocks, warm blood pooling around his body, staining his t-shirt and pants. Behind his body laid a Spawn of Ammit, breathing heavily, trapped by one of the bunker’s fallen gates, unable to devour what was Lucas Morales’s body and soul. The vision turned tam to face another portion of the bunker, and in it, ta saw a young man running for his life and get trapped by one of the gates. Then, a Spawn of Ammit appeared before the man and pounced onto him. Eyes rolled back into place, panting and sweating, Frantisko looked forwards and saw Janus standing with his arms at his sides and four candles, one for each corner, around the marble slab illuminating the room. Both portals had disappeared.

“What did you see?” asked the young woman.

“I saw parts of my past and future,” replied Frantisko.

“No duh! I’ve been here long enough to know that smart-ass!” she replied. She nudged Frantisko’s elbow. “Tell me what you actually saw.”

“I saw us in bed,” said Frantisko, “together, and I saw my previous body get killed and another young man about to be killed. Both scenes were equally disturbing.”

“Excuse you!” said she. “I hadn’t even asked you out yet for an official date. which I was hoping we could do right after this.”

“No thanks,” said Frantisko.

“But your future awaits you, and your past calls you there,” she replied earnestly.

“My past calls me to a long night all by myself and some well-deserved sleep. I have been through enough already,” said Frantisko.

“But your future has only just begun,” she said. “You cannot just ignore what Janus has shown you.”

“Godly or mortal,” said Frantisko, “I do not believe in prophecies or visions. The Fates do not matter anymore in times like these; mortals can be just as powerful as gods, given the right tools.”

“We heard that,” said Janus with his eyes rolled back, having received a message through the Ether from the Fates.

“Okay, okay. The Fates do matter, still,” said Frantisko, turning to speak to the Fates within Janus.

His eyes rolled back into place, and Janus went back to absorbing the energy of the prayers from his followers: the ones who keep coming back for more visions. It was a net gain of energy; it hardly took any energy to show what happened to people within the past three days and show what could happen in the next three days. Being at a club, most of the visions were rather boring: somebody got upset or into an argument and went to the bar to meet new people and lose their sorrows; somebody will get drunk and wake up somewhere they have never been before doing something they had not planned- like lying in the ditch on the side of a road hugging a pygmy goat.

Turning back to his young woman friend, Frantisko said, “I thank you for the wonderful time I have had with you, but I must sincerely decline your offer to go on a date. I must be going.”

“Alae iacta est!” the young woman said. “The die has been cast! So be it!”

Frantisko slowly pushed tamsel off the floor and walked by tamsel from the hidden room, through the two big black curtain, and back onto the colorful noisy dance floor. Ta pushed, straining tamsel a lot, through the swarm of party-goers and hobbled over to the bar where tas unfinished bubble tea laid, undrank and lonely.

Frantisko bent over, almost falling flat on the floor, and grabbed tas cane which ta rested beside tas bar stool. Ta got onto the bar stool and grabbed tas bubble tea. It was rather warm, being left all alone. Ta felt tas breasts to see if they were still cold. They were. So, ta pulled out the icepacks and placed them around tas bubble tea to cool it down. Frantisko sipped up the last of tas bubble tea and held the boba pearls in tas mouth like a chipmunk, saving them to chew on the rest of the ride back to tas apartment.

With cheeks full and bulging, uncreasing some the wrinkles in tas face, Frantisko grabbed tas cane and walked out of Club Cougar with the strobe lights lighting up tas backside. Ta passed the bouncers at the door, gave a longing look at each of them, and walked across the street to find tas taxi.

Ta found the taxi driver leaning on the driver’s side door of the taxi drinking a creamy frothy deep yellow mango lassi.

“Hey man! What are you being paid to do?” said Frantisko. “Get in the taxi, open the door, and let me in, please.”

He dutifully obeyed, and Frantisko threw tas cane onto the floor of the taxi’s backseats. ta sprawled tamsel out, laying down, across the three backseats, gazing up to stare at the ceiling of the taxi.

“Take me home, wherever that is,” said Frantisko, and ta began to slowly the boba pearls that ta had stored inside tas cheeks.

The taxi got back onto the streets and navigated itself through the lights and darkness of the Great Celebration to bring Frantisko to tas home, wherever it was.

“One more question,” said Faiza, before ending her phone call with Viktor, “has the Bureau of Population Management been informed yet of the death of Simon’s husband?”

“No, madame,” said Viktor. “Would you like me to inform them right now?”

“No thank you,” said Faiza, “I would like to do this myself.” She put down the phone and ended her call with Viktor and smiled.

She picked up the phone, dialed the Bureau of Death Management, and requested to report a death. This information would also be relayed to the Bureau of Population Management to check their records and verify that Simon's husband appeared in Purgatory and made a choice on where to go; Ammit was required to keep records of these things, another reason why she needed such a large army on standby all the time. Bureaucracy was a little out of hand. Ammit was first required to report the records to the Bureau of Population Management before talking to the Bureau of Death Management for some reason or another. Ammit did not ask why; she hated dealing with the mortals. Maybe in the next Global Legislative Counsel session they would correct these little inefficiencies, but one could never tell with twelve billion people all voicing their opinions.

"Greetings, this is Faiza, lead investigator at the Bureau of Justice," said Faiza, "I would like to report a death."

"Thank you for your call," said a middle-aged man on the other end of the line. "Your call is very important to us, please wait while I redirect your call to someone that can help you."

Beep, click.

"Hello, this is Agurne, Clerk of Soul Statistics," said Agurne, "how may I help you?"

"I would like to report the death of Tony, the husband of Simon the AUM," said Faiza, trying to feign sadness.

"Aw, it is such a sad thing to hear that," said Agurne. "From what I remember in the news a couple of weeks ago, they were getting ready to celebrate their anniversary. Such a sad thing. He must feel so bad right now."

"I can only imagine," said Faiza.

"Simon's relationship status has now been updated as single," said Agurne, typing quickly on her keyboard, "and Tony has been registered as dead, now."

"May you check with the Bureau of Death Management to see if Ammit has reported the arrival of Tony's soul into Purgatory and whether or not Tony's soul has departed Purgatory," said Faiza.

"Sure, just wait a minutes while I call them," said Agurne. She dialed up Ammit, who was still angry about losing one of her Spawns to the Colorado bunker incident, and received word that Tony had never appeared in Purgatory.

"Faiza, Tony did never showed up in Purgatory," said Agurne.

“That is quite interesting,” said Faiza. *Maybe I should check if the other souls from the Colorado bunker incident showed up in Purgatory*, thought Faiza. *This could be the lead that we need.*

“Agurne, did any of the other souls appear in Purgatory at the same time as Lucas Morales, currently known as Frantisko Biskup?” said Faiza.

“Let me get Ammit back on the line. Hold on for a few minutes please,” said Agurne. Ammit told her that she had not seen anyone else appear en masse with Lucas Morales.

Agurne got back on the line with Faiza and said, “No, neither Ammit nor her army saw anyone appear en masse with Lucas Morales. It would appear he is the only one.”

“Thank you,” said Faiza.

Agurne called the Department of Population Management.

“Hello, this is Agurne, the Clerk of Soul Statistics from the Bureau of Death Management,” said Agurne. “I would like to make sure that Simon the AUM’s relationship status has been updated and broadcast across all active dating networks.”

“Greetings, this is Goodwin, the Chief Matchmaker at the Bureau of Population Management,” said Goodwin. “Thank you for the news, Agurne. What is Simon the AUM’s new relationship status?”

“Simon the AUM is now single due to the recent and tragic death of his husband, Tony,” said Agurne.

“Ah. That is quite sad, but grief cannot be sustained for long in our society. It is not good for increasing the population; sad people do not make enough babies, and sad babies usually do not live long enough to reproduce,” said Goodwin. He looked up Simon the AUM’s name on all the databases of their many and varied dating sites, found a few still labeling him as married, and rectified that immediately.

“All too true, my dear,” said Agurne.

“I have just corrected Simon the AUM’s name on all dating databases. I will have a someone at his residence immediately to notify him that he has twenty-four hours from the moment the he receives the message to find a new partner, and if he fails to do so, he will be taken by the state and turned into a hermaphrodite,” said Goodwin.

“Thank you for your time,” said Agure. “Have a good day, and please tell the representative from the Bureau of Population Management that you send to tell Simon the AUM that the Bureau of Death Management sends him their sincere condolences.”

“You’re welcome,” said Goodwin. “We shall be sure to tell him that you all send him your condolences.”

Agurne and Goodwin hanged up their phones and went back to their jobs.

Ah ha! thought Faiza. She picked up the phone and called the Bureau of Artifacts.

“Salutations! This is Faiza, the Lead Investigator from the Bureau of Justice,” said Faiza.

“Greetings, Faiza! This is Ingelburt, the Supreme Curator of the Bureau of Artifacts,” said Ingelburt. “How may I help you?”

“I would like to check the list of artifacts that are currently missing from the Bureau of Artifacts’s museums and warehouses. Ignore the artifacts that have been loaned to the Bureau of Justice for investigative purposes,” said Faiza. “Also, please may you check if any bodies of gods or artifact-related beings are missing, too?”

“Will do!” said Ingelburt. He checked the databases and received a long list; more than enough artifacts and bodies were missing to warrant putting their bureau up for review by the state and the people.

“Um, may you clarify your search?” said Ingelburt.

“Your list is pretty long isn’t it?” said Faiza. “I hope you and your bureau has fun when the International Department of Magic and Public Relations finds out!” She giggled; it was fun watching the other bureaus get into trouble with idMPR. She was one of the few that managed her bureau so effectively that idMPR rarely had to intervene or talk with her, and she held that title proudly.

“Look for any artifacts related to the soul that have gone missing in the past three years,” said Faiza.

Ingelburt narrowed his query and relayed the results to Faiza.

“The Robe of Santa Muerte, the Scythe of Azrael, the Scales of Anubis, the Danda of Yama, the Cu-Sith’s Pelt, the Heart of Osiris, Hel’s Headband, the Throne of Prajapati, and the Throne of Yuanshi Tianzunare are currently missing,” said Ingelburt.

“Thank you,” said Faiza, writing down the list of missing artifacts relating to the soul. “Are there any missing bodies related to those artifacts?”

“No, only the one that you have found. The Guardian of the Heart of Osiris is missing,” said Ingelburt.

“Thank you again,” said Faiza. She put down the phone.

After a long walk through pushing and shoving through the Great Celebration party-goers in the city and past many interesting sites on the streets, Jun arrived at the commons outside of the Lincoln Center and stood leaning against the black metal railing around the water fountain, waiting for the rest of her partners to arrive. They may have been delayed by some delinquents of Kutkh- people dressed up as ravens trying to heckle, confuse, and otherwise play with the party-goers. *They were an entertaining crowd*, thought Jun.

She clutched her snake leather bag tightly and felt the side of the bag to make sure the Heart of Osiris was still in there, beating and content. It was. Thump, squish, thump, squish. All was fine with the Heart. It liked the excitement of this new adventure. It wondered what would come of it. She shifted back and forth from her right foot to her left foot and back again, making ripples in the fabric of her blueish green sebleh which made her uneasiness all the more apparent. Luckily, it was still very dark, and the light was sporadic.

After ten minutes later, as planned, Gorica came sauntering around the water fountain and met up with Jun. Gorica’s constellation sarafan shimmered and sparkled as light was reflected off of her dress and crescent-moon shaped kokoshnik. The Mask of Zorya hid Gorica’s face from view, pitch black as the darkness that all had walked through.

“How are you?” said Gorica.

“Good, just good,” said Jun. “You arrived on schedule. So we are fine.”

“I meant how you were doing, no the mission,” said Gorica.

“How I am doing is irrelevant,” said Jun.

“Are you sure?” said Gorica. “You are the leader of this mission. We cannot have a psychopath for a leader, now, can we?”

“I am sure my moods do not matter, at this moment,” said Jun. “As for being a psychopath, anyone would be crazy to steal from the Bureau of Artifacts because of how harsh the Bureau of Justice is, let alone get on the International Department of Magic and Public Relation’s bad side.”

“They are not aware of us, yet, are they?” said Gorica.

“No, I do not think so,” said Jun. “I asked a few favors of Janus last year when I was on vacation to make sure this year went well. He said a few good words to the right Survivors for me.”

“Yeah, I think I remember you telling me something last year, like, ‘Sweetie, this will be too dangerous for you. Stay home while I go hunt for Janus,’” said Gorica.

“It was dangerous!” exclaimed Jun.

“Yeah right! I checked your files on your computer; Janus was hanging out at a go-go bar for the past ten years under the radar. The most dangerous thing you probably encountered were a few pretty elderly ladies,” said Gorica.

“Well, you do have to admit,” said Jun, “you have to wonder what older people do with all their time, eh?”

“No, no you do not have to wonder,” said Gorica. “Elderly people are just like us. They have social lives, like us, and work to do, like us, too. Also, they, still despite their age, have lifetime goals and aspirations, too.”

“How would you know?” said Jun.

“have you tried talking to them?” said Gorica. “It is amazing what one learns when they listen hard enough.”

Jun rolled her eyes.

“And do not do that to me, again!” said Gorica.

“Do what?” said Jun, rolling her eyes again.

“That!” said Gorica.

“What is ‘that’ that you speak of?” said Jun

“You know exactly what I mean,” said Gorica. “I can see very well with the Mask of Zorya on. It does more than you think it does, Jun”

“Yes, I think you have told me before,” said Jun. “ Zorya is the midnight goddess, protector of the night, and guardian of the unnamed beast that lays in wake within Ursa Minor, waiting to escape and devour the known Universe. For the most part, Zorya does not actually have a name; she is the unnamed third sister of the Zoryi.”

“I am quite impressed you remembered that much,” said Gorica, smiling. “You might want to pay heed to that knowledge. I have the Mask of Zorya for a reason, as do all our other partners. Each artifact is crucial to our plan, as you have reminded me before. Maybe practicing what you preach would serve you best.”

“Please do not lecture me,” said Jun. “I have a Master’s of Arts in Mythology and Occultism with a minor in archaeology.”
Gorica sighed, her expression hidden behind her mask.

Swaggering around the other side of the water fountain, Kai appeared behind Jun and said nothing. Gorica did not say anything either about Kai. The cool light reflecting off of the water fountain had illuminated Kai’s upper body, keeping his waist pouch with the Canoe of Lono inside hidden from view.

“It has been more than half an hour for sure,” said Jun. “We should go back and look for Kai.”

“I am right here,” said Kai, nonchalantly.

“You could have, at the very least, told me that you were hear,” said Jun,

“Nah, it was interesting to hear you two bicker,” said Kai. “Both of you sound like an old married couple already, and it has been how many years since you two became friends?”

“That does not matter!” said Jun. “We are just friends, and she just so happens to be a girl. That is all. Ok?” Jun was getting a little annoyed, sooner than she had planned. She did not like it when things did not go according to her schedule.

“Ok, if you say so,” said Kai.

“I do say so,” said Jun. “Please be professional.”

“Arguing is not very professional,” said Kai.

“Thank you for your wisdom, Kai,” said Jun. “You sound so much more like Gorica everyday.”

Walking quickly and dutifully with a strong sense of purpose, Betje marched around the water fountain and stood beside Gorica, the top of her head almost reaching Gorica’s bellybutton. Light sparkled off of the golden brooches that held Betje’s brown hangerock to her green shift; the Gjallarhorn still looked like a small black, white, and brown cow horn. So the illusionary charm Jun had given Betje had worked.

“What’s the word on the street?” said Betje. “Who are we still waiting on?”

“We are still waiting on Aucaman and Kojo,” said Jun.

“There is no word on the street,” said Jun. “Nothing relevant to us; however, we may need to be a little extra cautious because the International Department of Magic and Public relations has publicly announced through all forms of media that the Bureau of Justice has recently started the hunt to find the Heart of Osiris. There was also a notice by the Bureau of Population Management that Simon the AUM is now available for dating because his husband died in the Colorado bunker incident.”

“That is quite sad,” said Betje, commiserating the fact that they had played a role in Tony’s death.

“I know. That is exactly how the Bureau of Population Management felt,” said Jun, “but we knew people were going to die, and they did. That was the opportunity cost to get the Heart of Osiris. Remember what we are doing this for. You cannot forget the bigger purpose of all this.”

“We know,” said Kai, Betje, and Gorica in unison. “We are trying to save the world.”

After a good ten minutes explaining why the means justify the ends to Batje, Kai, and Gorica, Jun saw Kojo walk around the water fountain towards them.

“Boa tarde!” greeted Kojo as he approached Gorica and Betje and Jun.

“Please speak to me in English only,” said Jun. “You know how it annoys me when I do not know what other people are saying.”

“Do you not have an artifact for that?” said Kojo.

“I do,” said Jun, “but I prefer to not waste my energy on such trivial things like languages.”

“How is Elegua doing?” said Jun, looking at Kojo’s green Eleke around his neck.

Touching his Eleke, Kojo felt listened to how what was left of Elegua felt.

“Elegua is fine. It is just as excited as we are,” said Kojo.

“Does it like your outfit?” said Jun.

He touched his Eleke again and received a warm cuddly sensation throughout his body.

“Yes,” said Kojo. “Elegua is very pleased with my green dashiki, light green pants, and dark green kufi. It was so pleased that it gave me its blessing.”

“Could Elegua bless us all?” said Jun.

“No,” said Kojo, “the Fates have not foretold such events. It would be unwise to give you help that you were not meant to have.”

In the Beyond, Yggdrasil swayed back and forth smiling at this as it sensed that things were being set into motion. Its excitement leaked into the aurpa-loka, accidentally making everyone in all realms briefly happy.

The mood lightened a bit, and Aucaman came walkign around the water fountain and stood beside Kai.

“Salutations Jun!” said Aucaman, raising his right arm to wave to her. His white deerskin shirt’s frills flapped as he moved his arm, and his the movement of the water in the fountain could be seen from the reflection cast on his light brown leather pants. His gray moccasins could barely be distinguished from the ground; it looked like he had no feet.

“So we are all here?” said Jun, and she looked around to confirm that everyone was with her. They were, and she was happy. They had all arrived to their meeting point on time.

Meanwhile, Simon the AUM was standing by the body of Tony in the Ether, waiting for the statue of Brahma to bring Brahma to him for a conversation. The fog was swirling around him as he tried to bend the Ether to his will to create animate objets and beings.

It shifted and took form briefly. A dog, a cat, a squirrel. The Ether could briefly take on the shapes that he desired to have life, but shortly after, it would return to the murky foggy substance that it was. It did not behave like air in his home realm- Kay Pacha- that he could shape and animate with his energy. *Maybe I should visit the Ether more often to experiment on this*, thought Simon.

He thought about a statue of his husband, Tony, and it appeared in perfect likeness. He thought of a stuffed bear, and it appeared fur, claws, eyes, and all before him. Nothing too special about either of them; anyone could do this. That was why the government liked to have schools train and educate people in the Ether- very few resources were consumed in the process.

Simon thought of a ukulele, and it appeared in his hands. It was made of mango wood, light brown, polished, and many little ripple-like patterns shown in the wood.

Gently, Simon walked up to the statue of Tony and thought about the statue with arms open ready to hold him in its arms. Simon got up and clambered into the statue of Tony’s arms and began to sing his final song to Tony.

It was one of love and loss and hope.

He apologized to Tony in the song about having lost his life to save him. He felt guilty for having survived, but he promised, in the end, that his death would not be in vain, that Simon will finish what they had started together.

“What a lovely song!” said Brahma, his statue trailing behind him in the Ether. “I cannot thank your great great great grandmother, Susanne Braveheart the AUM anymore for saving my life.”

He looked at Simon in the hands of the statue of Tony, looked down to see Tony’s body, and thought the whole thing odd.

“Well, it is quite a pleasure to finally meet you Simon the AUM,” said Brahma. “You inherited Susanne’s singing skills as well as her power, apparently. Now to point, how may I help you?”

Simon was a little startled by Brahma’s arrival, and he quickly jumped off out of the statue of Tony’s arms and stood up to greet Brahma. He placed his ukulele beside the body of Tony and thought away the statue of Tony.

Hurriedly, Simon bowed to Brahma and said, “namaste,” and stood back up.

“Thank you for coming to me when I asked for you, Brahma,” said Simon.

“The pleasure is all mine,” said Brahma. “I am indebted to your great great great grandmother and her descendants forever. It is most enjoyable to watch the accomplishments of your ancestors. Do you not agree?”

“I never really cared for learning about family history,” said Simon. “I prefer to make my own.”

“Do you think that is a little hubris of you?” said Brahma, trying to teach Simon the virtues he missed out on as a child.

“Maybe a little,” said Simon. “I have called you for some help with my plan.”

“The one that got your husband killed?” asked Brahma.

“Yes,” said Simon, “that is the one.”

“Explain to me what that was meant to accomplish again,” said Brahma. “The logic of you mortals confounds me.”

Simon was suspicious that someone may be listening in on their conversation in the Ether, so he signed the answer to Brahma.

“Ah!” said Brahma. “I can help you some. If I help you this time, will you promise not to ask for my help anymore during your current lifetime? That is Forbidden Knowledge you are asking for.”

“Yes,” said Simon, “I agree.”

So Brahma leaned close to Simon, and he imagined a black sphere around them and signed to Simon a Forbidden Spell.

“There you go,” said Brahma. “You have now entered the level of the gods. You have learned your first Forbidden Spell. Now I must be off.”

The black sphere vanished, and Brahma floated off through the Ether quickly and disappeared, leaving the statue of Brahma behind him with Simon.

Simon laid down onto the floor and rolled onto Tony’s body and fell into his own.

Rolling his eyes back into place, Simon woke up holding hands with the little wooden statue of Brahma.

Releasing Simon’s hands, the statue of Brahma got up and ran off into Simon’s food forest, leaving Simon alone to himself.

In the Beyond, Yggdrasil swayed back and forth smiling again, this time controlling its excitement as to not disturb the arupa-loka. *Eeeh, hehe*, thought Yggdrasil. *The time the Fates have foretold is approaching.*

Simon laid back onto the grass and gazed up at the sky that shone down on the sun-trap’s pond. It was peaceful feeling the gentle breeze rustle through food forest and tickling his leg and chest hair. He smiled as the breeze cooled his mind, content knowing that he could now progress forward with his plans.

Flash! Bang! Boom! A flash of thunder and lightning was emitted from the sky above his food forest, sounding the alarm that someone unauthorized had entered his property. A dark storm cloud grew overhead that only Simon and other authorized personnel could see.

Lighting struck Simon before he could get up and teleported him to the top of the Great Baobab Tree so that he could scan his property to find the intruder. A circle of teak-colored light opened up beneath Simon from the Great Baobab tree and engulfed his entire body, connecting his mind with that of the Great Baobab Tree. Traveling as one, his mind flowed and permeated down the Great Baobab Tree’s trunk, past the Circle of Feastings and into all the trees and living organisms connected to the system.

He saw through the eyes of the praying mantises that were hiding in wait inside his herb spiral.

He saw through the eyes of the cute furry little squirrels scampering through his food forest gathering acorns from the oak trees near his house.

He saw felt through the mint plants that had become overlords of the mulched path leading up to his home. He could feel the pressure the person's footsteps exerted on the soil. The worms would decompact this later.

He could smell through the pigs that were wandering nearby the intruder the lavender perfume the person was wearing. It was not bad, but not true to the flower.

What he saw, smelled, and felt did not indicate any danger. What had arrived was a formally dressed woman in black shoes, black pants, black suit with a red shirt underneath, and a black bowler hat on her head. This person carried a pair of roses in her left hand, one black and one red- symbolizing the duality on the message she was carrying, one of grief and joy. She had a paper card in her other hand, black with a red heart inscribed on the front and the letter R-I-P inscribed on the back in gold.

Although she posed not threat at the moment, it was best not to keep government officials waiting even at his rank of power. No one ever knew when one of them might pull out a Wand of Leeching or try breaking and entering somebody's body or mind through the Ether. The International Department of Magic and Public Relations made sure every agent, no matter how menial their job was, prepared for the worst. Their strength scared most people from messing with them, but the Global Court of Law and the Global Legislative Counsel were more than ready to put idMPR in line when its bureaus got out of hand. So, truly, she could not use force unless it was justifiable. Regardless, he knew what the message was about and did not have to worry.

So, Simon asked the Great Baobab Tree to invoke his security system's teleport again, and it kindly obliged him. The circle of light closed, and Simon's mind was back inside his body when the lightning struck him. Another strike of lightning hit his homestead, and he appeared inside his bedroom. Looking at himself, Simon thought, *I cannot go outside looking this*. He was a little dirty and shirtless which he remedied by dusting off the dirt and putting on a light blue polo t-shirt that complemented his eyes nicely.

Simon hurriedly walked downstairs and sat at a table inside his kitchen waiting for the doorbell to ring. He twiddled his thumbs around and hummed to himself.

Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

Well, I wonder what she is going to say, thought Simon. How sad it was that my husband died. Oh well. They are rather late. I was there. They cannot know what it is was like for me. It is quite annoying how they pretend to think they know how sad deaths are. At least they try.

Simon got up, pushing his chair back, and walked to the door.

Knock! Knock!

He opened the door a peep and said, “who is it?”

The woman had bright red lipstick on and replied, “This is Moana, a representative from the Bureau of Population Management.”

She paused and quickly plastered a fake sorrowful expression on her face before speaking again. It was almost more pitiful to watch her try and look sad than listen to her monotone voice.

She opened her mouth again.

“I am here to notify you of the death of your husband, Tony,” said Moana. “Would you be so kind as to open the door? The Bureau of Death Management has a few gifts for you.”

“Yes,” said Simon; he had seen this routine before and knew what happened next.

He undid the latch to his door and pulled back the door-screen so that she could speak to him.

“Your husband died under mysterious circumstances in a bunker in Colorado, deep within the Rocky Mountains. All that was left was one cell of his body, and it was found in a room with two operating tables and the sarcophagus of the Guardian of the Heart of Osiris. The results of the investigation are still pending. We will have a representative from the Bureau of Justice contact you when the results come out,” said Moana. She handed Simon the black rose.

She instantly started smiling and said, “on the up side, your new single status has now been broadcast by the Bureau of Population Management through all available dating services. Here is another gift for you.” She gave Simon the paper card and the red rose.

Simon put both roses in one hand and opened the card, and read what it said;

Our sincere condolences from the Bureau of Population Management for the death in your household. We would like to inform you now that you have twenty-four hours to find a new partner before the Bureau of Population Management will be required to collect you for processing. The letters on the card started to change as the countdown timer ticked to twenty-three hours fifty-nine minutes and thirty seconds. P.S. The Bureau of Death Management wishes you the best.

He closed the card, holding it in his right hand.

“How thoughtful of you all,” said Simon sarcastically.

“No problem,” said Moana. “The pleasure was all ours. Come now!”

She brusquely grabbed Simon's arm right arm and tucked it underneath her left arm. Simon dropped the flowers.

He reached down to pick them up.

"Don't worry about those," said Moana. "They will find their way home. Now, you are a completely different story, sweetie!" She smiled widely, a sly cute smile.

"Goodwin, the Chief Matchmaker of the Bureau of Population Management, only wants the best the world has to offer for you. Despite your conduct while doing research for them in the past, he is willing to overlook that. His heart is just so broken. Oh so so sad for you," said Moana.

"Tell me the truth," said Simon rather harshly, tired of her games.

"Goodwin enjoyed your little antics. They were most amusing for him and the staff to watch unfold in real life," said Moana. "He is considering rehiring you again on the condition that you not make them laugh so hard. It was rather distracting and detracted them from their real job, but they did enjoy it so."

"Were you given permission to tell me this?" said Simon.

"Ah! NetherWorldly no! Do you really think he would tell you this?" said Moana. "I hear things, and I share them at my leisure. I did not want you being caught unawares, and I had hoped my kindness would gain me a little favor with you."

She smiled again, trying her best to seem as genuine as possible, and looked at Simon in the eyes.

"Is it working?" she said, fluttering her eyelids.

"Not quite. You look more liked a depressed chipmunk who ate too many acorns than a sad puppy," said Simon.

She nudged him in the ribs.

"Humph!" said Moana. "Well, you will still have to date me. I am in your official Dating Pool as per the Chief Matchmaker's orders. You know they still make everyone date all four human sexes, two or more human-other hybrids, two completely different non-human species, and then some on dates to make sure that everyone keeps an open mind. Just because you are the AUM does not mean you get to bypass the rules."

"I wish I could," said Simon, shuffling his feet on the ground wishing he only had to date some human males and choose one.

Moana walked with Simon arm and arm down his mulched path. She led him to a carriage pulled by cyborg horses that was waiting for them.

“Look there!” said Simon. “What do you call those things?” He was pointing his finger at the cyborg horses.

“They are horses,” said Moana. “They do not appreciate being pointed at. Put your finger down, will you?” She pulled his left arm down, and he acquiesced.

“I thought I would be nice to you and not bring something more frightening onto your property like one of our Leviathan Choppers,” said Moana. “To my disdain, you do not appreciate such kindness from me.”

“Kindness? No, those are not horses,” said Simon. “Look at the gears, circuits, and wires on them. That is not natural!”

“And magic is?” said Moana. She let go of Simon, grabbed him with both arms, and looked him in the eyes.

“Yes, magic is natural,” said Simon, “more so than your mechanical wonders from Heimdallr.”

“You should not talk like that,” said Moana. “Have you seen the paintings of your great great grandmother Susanne Braveheart the AUM on her mechanical dragon fighting to humanity?”

“Yes, I have, and do you know how many people keep telling me to be like her?” said Simon. “A lot. A lot more people than you could imagine. That is why I am secluded. Everyone knows magic is not necessary to solve their problems, but la di da, they ask me for the easy way out!”

“Fine, be that way,” said Moana. “You do know that the Global Citizen Science Action Network has already developed ways to cross the realms without dying?”

“Yes, I have heard about that,” said Simon, “and I have heard about the Yggdrasil, the World Tree, sending out masses of roots to the gaps between the realms, preventing anyone or anything from crossing over. All you all have really had are sneak peaks, nothing substantial to boost my interest.”

“All right,” said Moana. “Fair enough. We will agree to disagree on this one, but I will have you know those horses are perfectly content and are rather fond of me and their upgrades.” She hooked her left arm back under Simon’s right arm and walked him up to the carriage. She pulled the door off of its hinges to open it and display her strength. She then proceeded to pick Simon up off the ground in her arms and set him down in the right hand seat of the carriage.

Moana snapped her fingers, sending the door to the carriage back in place, and it welded its hinges back on so that the door did not fly off when they begin traveling.

She curled her right hand in towards her palm and blew on her pink fingernails. She thought, *look at me.*

Without missing a beat, she walked confidently up to the driver's seat of the carriage and grabbed the leather straps that were tied to the horses.

"Buckle up!" she yelled as she turned around to Simon. "You are in for one heck of a ride!"

She took off her bowler hat and tossed it to Simon.

Klink, chug, gasp, klink, thump, squish. The bowler hat started to breathe and gasp as it came to life. The leather black felt covering the actual device was sucked in through the inside of the hat and devoured to provide the energy necessary for it to turn itself on.

"The Global Citizen Science Action Network makes pretty cool stuff like this on a daily basis to help the common good!" said Moana. "They blend science and magic together. To me, it is pretty damn cool! Anyhow, it does not matter what you think. Place that over your mouth if you want to live!"

She jostled the reins to the horses, and they sped into the air faster than a falcon.

While they were climbing higher and higher into the air, Simon turned the hat's inside up to face him and saw that it was filling up with a green squishy liquid that had the consistency of pudding. He lifted the hat up with both hands, careful not to spill the hat's contents, and saw solar panels covering the outside of the hat. He brought the hat back down to look inside, and the green liquid had formed lips that were smacking, smooch, smooch, smooch!

Simon sighed with disgust and placed the bowler hat over the lower half of his face. The lips inside the hat grew in size and swallowed his nose and mouth completely, exuding a slimy nanobiotic substance all over, filling the gaps between his nose and mouth. The goo slipped its way up his nostrils and into his mouth every single time he breathed. Tiny metallic claws, hundreds of them, popped out of the sides of the hat and grabbed tightly onto his face, creating an air tight seal.

"Why am I not getting hurt by the pressure differences?" said Simon, his voice amplified by the living mechanical hybrid bowler hat.

Glancing back towards Simon, Moana, with a gas mask that was attached to the horses, said, "The horses, here, that you insulted handle that. The carriage itself creates most of the lift. You

better be happy that these guys are rather friendly; they don't seek retribution like the leviathan choppers and octopod balloons."

"Gee, thanks buddies!" said Simon to the horses.

They reared and shook the manes, jostling the tubes coming out of their necks, in approval of what Simon had said.

"They appreciate you for being kind to them. They forgive you," translated Moana.

Simon looked around the sky and saw a flock dodojays fly by the left side of the carriage. They drifted up and nosed dived out of sight.

"Why am I not seeing more things in the sky?" said Simon.

Because she had a lot of things to focus on while flying, without turning backwards, Moana said, "Remember when you were seven? You chose to participate in an augmented reality study being offered by the University of Pangea United. The technology wasn't perfect then."

"I vaguely recall," said Simon, struggling to think back that far. "Refresh my memory, please."

"Well, you agreed to their study, and the augmented reality allowed you to see the world however you wanted to," said Moana. "You chose to see the world as it was before the Great War and even before that, taking comfort in the simpler versions of human civilization. We learned all this from the data collected during the study. You were allowed to keep the implant after the study concluded; however, with time, you forgot that you were not seeing the same world that everyone else saw. You forgot you had the implant."

"What about the rest of humanity?" said Simon.

"They are perfectly fine," said Moana. "After the study, the University of Pangea United petitioned Global Citizen Science Action Network to let them release the implant to the public. GCSAN refused. It would be unwise to allow people to live in their made-up worlds any longer. People had to see reality and the everything for what it really was. They did not want the peoples of the Earth to become content in their fantasies. If they wanted a better world, they were going to have to work for it, and so we have."

"But where is the North American NanoStorm, and the Canadian Saber-toothed Geese?" said Simon. "I should be able to see them. I have been reading the news."

"I am impressed with you," said Moana. "Maybe I did underestimate you. You are not as ignorant as I had expected."

“Well, where are they?” said Simon.

“You haven’t experienced anything shocking enough to break the circuits in your implant,” cried out Moana.

“Why can’t I use my magic to get rid of it?” said Simon. “Or remove it by surgery?”

“That would kill you,” she said. “Your magic is too strong for anyone to to magical or physical surgery on you. Your subconscious would kick in and kill anyone who tried, and nobody’s magic will let them do harm to themselves.”

“For being the AUM,” said Moana, “You sure don’t know a lot.”

“What did you expect?” said Simon. “I’m not a specialist in medicinal magic. Mostly, I do social, archaeological, and research orientated tasks with my skills.”

“Susanne Braveheart the AUM was quite a Renaissance Woman for her time,” said Moana.

Simon sighed again. *Why did everyone always want me to be like her? Couldn’t they just let me be be?* thought Simon.

“I’m not Susanne!” said Simon.

“We know you aren’t,” said Moana, “but we wish you were.”

“Well, you have been reading the news which is a good sign,” said Moana. “That explains why you could see the horses were cyborgs in the first place.”

As they climbed steadily into the airspace above Montana, it got colder, and storm clouds brewed overhead near the tips of the Rocky Mountains. Simon could hear wolves and coyotes calling each other across the mountain range. The song of the Mourning Akialoa could be heard strumming through the sky; it sounded like a gong emanating from a temple, deep and loud.

Snow descended upon the Rocky Mountains, and Moana steered their carriage southeast, out of the path of the storm. Hail, small as sand but sharp as nails, was mixed in with the snow, and it pelted the dravenflies that flew northwest past Simon and Moana. Their black feathers were stripped by the torrential storm, and many fell plummeting to Earth in horrid death spirals. Their shiny red compound eyes were fixated on the storm that was killing them off. In their final moments, they reached out and sent reverberations through the arupa-loka, pleading for help, for someone or something to save them. The wolves and coyotes, cold and shivering, whimpering from the hail’s abuse, joined in with the dravenflies’ pleading. Coming from the depths of caves in the Rocky Mountains, loud squeaks could be heard. A large swarm of long-nosed exothermbats rose into the sky, and with them, heat radiated out of their swarm, melting the hail

before it could hit the unfortunate souls below. Their bodies glowed like the early morning sun, casting a brilliant radiance upon the mountainside. As they approached the dark storm cloud, the water changed from solid to liquid and back to a gas. They ensphered the storm cloud, cornering it all around, trapping the darkness within their warm radiant mass. Beating their wings furiously, the exothermbats made four holes in their sphere and jettisoned the hot moist air outwards to all four cardinal directions. Rapidly shooting downwards, the exothermbats raced the dravenflies to ground and created a strong warm updraft of air to prevent the dravenflies from falling to doom.

Enough time was provided for the dravenflies to realign themselves midfall and calibrate their flight patterns to compensate for the loss of many feathers.

Having finished their job, the exothermbats flew back into the bowels of the Rocky Mountains and went to sleep. The next day, they would wake up to find gifts of food piled throughout their cavern as thanks from the wolves, coyotes, and dravenflies for having aided them.

Life is wonderful, thought Simon. Even those unnatural beasts understand and apply the tit for tat behavior strategy.

Looking around, Simon could see lines of red light etched into the sky, above, below, and all around him. His eyes were opening more and more as the implant lost some of its grip on his mind.

Meanwhile in Minnesota, Faiza was gathering her stuff and getting ready to begin her search for the missing artifacts. She walked away from the phone and returned to the laboratory to talk to Tondra.

“Hello, Tondra?” said Faiza. “Are you all right now?”

Tondra looked up to Faiza and said mellowly, “Yes, I’m good, now.”

“Ready to go on an adventure,” said Faiza, smiling as she looked into Tondra’s eyes.

“What kind of adventure are we talking about?” replied Tondra, her eyes shining with delight, something to make her feel better.

“We are going to hunt down some missing artifacts to locate our suspects,” said Faiza. “The artifacts we are looking for include the Robe of Santa Muerte, the Scythe of Azrael, the Scales of Anubis, the Danda of Yama, the Cu-Sith’s Pelt, the Heart of Osiris, Hel’s Headband, the Throne of Prajapati, and the Throne of Yuanshi Tianzunare.”

“What’s the point?” said Tondra. “Isn’t the Heart of Osiris the only one we need to look for, to make sure it is not missing, and if it is, find it.”

“It is not quite that simple,” said Faiza. “We are also looking for who killed the Spawn of Ammit; its death matters, too, not just the humans’ deaths.”

“I never would have guessed you cared that much,” said Tondra.

“I do,” Faiza. “However, unlike you, my emotions are not as freely displayed in public.”

“So, are you in?” she said.

“Yes!” said Tondra enthusiastically.

“Go to one of the storage cabinets and grab a few hypodermic needles filled with ATP, will you?” said Faiza. “We are going to have to be discreet. Body exchange fluid tanks would be conspicuous that we are performing heavy duty magic.”

“No problem,” said Tondra, and she walked along the edges of the lab to get to the storage cabinet.

“While you are doing that,” said Faiza, “I am going to get the Head of Wandjina out of the vault on the seventeenth floor. We are going to need it to locate all of the artifacts.”

Faiza walked out of the laboratory and walked through a white tiled hallway with androids patrolling the entrances to every room. They behaved and acted like regular people, most of the time. The main difference was that if one paid close attention while looking at the eyes, one could see a metallic shine in the eyes that came from the billions of microscopic cameras that made up their artificial eyes.

One of the androids, dressed as in ambiguous clothing, walked up to Faiza before she reached the silver elevator at the end of the hall.

“Greetings, madame,” said the android. “Do you have a form of identification with you?” Inside its head, a clock started to tick down. This was a secure floor, and unauthorized personnel would be teleported from the premises immediately and have their mind wiped of anything seen, heard, smelled, or thought while they were there.

Faiza pulled grabbed the right hand of the android with her left hand and turned the android’s palm upwards. She spit into the android’s palm.

Slurp! The saliva was absorbed into the android’s system which processed her DNA.

Opening its retinas wider, the android did a full-body scan of Faiza on ten different dimensions and announced, “Identity confirmed. You are free to go.”

“Thank you,” said Faiza. She walked up to the elevator, pressed the button, and walked in. She pressed the button to the seventeenth floor.

Looking upwards towards the elevator’s gray ceiling, Faiza took note of the red dot in the corner blinking. She was being watched, as usual, as expected. Faiza lifted her right arm up and waved at the camera, smiling.

“Salutations, Hallbjörn!” said Faiza to the security camera.

It blinked rapidly three times in acknowledgment.

“Having a busy day?” asked Faiza.

The wooden panels of the elevator floor moved up and down from left to right like the waves of water traveling through the sea.

“Glad to hear everything is normal,” said Faiza. “Any predictions for what might happen today?”

An orange light blipped on the elevator’s door panel; it was button number seventeen.

“Yes, of course,” said Faiza. “That was a rather obvious prediction.”

Shaking, the elevator laughed at her and let her out onto floor seventeen.

I guess he is in a good mood, she thought.

Faiza looked at the red tiled floor and gazed up towards the ceiling to admire the lantern-cyber-bugs that were clicking and clacking as they scampered around illuminating the main hallway with their bright yellow light.

She walked down the hallway and listened to the steady thump, squish, thump, squish sound that could be heard from all of the doors in the room. Each door had a living beating heart, imbued with magic and nanobots, to bring in blood from the tank that sat below the main hallway’s floor.

As she passed each door, their eyes turned to follow her, and she could hear the ticking of their hybrid brains. They glanced at her suspiciously; all arrivals on the seventeenth floor were supposed to be announced beforehand. She had not.

As she walked farther down the hallway, the red tiles were thumping biotiles with billions of enhanced microfollicles coating them like a carpet. Faiza could feel the biotiles breathing in the cells that fell from her body as she walked ontop of them. Each tile she stepped on briefly lit up green, approving her presence in the hallway. *So far so good, thought Faiza. They recognize me as the head of affairs, here. They do not seem too upset over my violation of protocol.*

Blip, blip, blip.

“You are now entering an Alpha Prime security zone,” said all of the doors in the hallway at once.

Before she could proceed to the vault in the door at the far end of the hallway, she would have to pass the submersion test.

Click, click, hiss!

All of the nooks and crannies in the hallway sealed shut, making the area airtight.

Red goo oozed from beneath the floor, rising slowly like lava from a volcano. The goo buzzed with activity, vibrating and humming as it moved. Each and every cell and nanobot was prepping for action.

Glub, glub, bubble.

Slithering upwards, the goo rose from the ground and crawled up the walls and across the ceiling, sending the lantern-cyber-bugs into dormancy as they came in contact with the red goo.

It got darker as the lights went out in the hallway. To make up for this, the red goo began to glow.

It dripped from the ceiling, coating her from above and below. The red goo was already up to belly button, and now it was flowing down her face and back like taking a shower in jello or oil.

Glorp! The red goo had almost fully submerged her. She did not float; the density of the goo and her body's density were about the same.

Burp! Whoosh! She was now completely submerged in the red goo, and she breathed it into her lungs. The goo vibrated as it found every crevice in her body and started to seep in through the pores of her skin. She could feel the goo removing all of her blood and replacing the blood with itself. Her body vibrated from within the goo became one with her. It checked and double and triple checked the DNA of every cell in her body, verifying her thoughts and magical potential with her supposed status and name.

You may pass, thought the goo inside of her head. Next time, please may you announce yourself first. Then, this could have been handled inside the elevator. It makes less of a mess, you know.

Draining slowly, the red goo exited her body, and gave her back her blood.

We could upgrade your body for you, right now, thought the red goo as the final drops of itself left through the pores in her skin. *All we would do is replace your cells with hybrid cells to make the best of both worlds.*

Thank, but no thanks, thought Faiza. *I rather enjoy the sensation of eating and drinking food.*

But it is such a waste of time, thought the goo. *Add to that the time it takes to urinate, have bowel movements, and shower; you have wasted half your life way. And not to mention, sleeping, too. Golly, you could be more efficient! If you were a hybrid, you would only have go to a power station and you'd be ready to go. Also, your magic could be fueled with electricity instead of that adenosine triphosphate stuff of yours.*

You make a strong case, thought Faiza, *but that is part of the strange beauty we enjoy as humans. We like to take it easy.*

Waste of time, thought the goo. *You all waste too much time. You could connect to the UltraNet, HyperArchive, and YottaBase instead of just the Ether. There is also the Universal Library, too.*

I would rather access those through a PUI (physical user interface), thought Faiza to the red goo. *I would get too confused with instant access to that much information twenty-nine twelve.*

You wouldn't get confused with a better brain, thought the goo.

No, no thank you, thought Faiza. *I am fine with my human limitations, okay. Maybe in ten or twenty years when age starts to kick in, I will reconsider your offer.*

Ok, thought the red goo, and the last drop exited her body, giving her back the last drop of her blood.

Intuitively, the red goo told the biotiles to shape themselves into a giant bowl and got the doors to push the regular tiles at the opposite end of the hallway into a slanted position. The red goo slipped down the tiles and off the floors, walls, and ceiling to enter the drainage basin. The lantern-cyber-bugs turned on, waking up from dormancy, and the red goo stopped glowing.

Swirling, the red goo spiraled down into the blood tanks beneath the floor.

Bzzz! Bzzz! A horde of vacuflies entered the hallway through the nooks and crannies that were reopened in the hallway to facilitate a normal airflow. They scampered all over the walls, ceiling, and tiles sucking up the red goo for storage in their stomachs. Sensing the red goo dripping on Faiza's lab coat, they swarmed onto her, removing the last the goo from her body and clothing.

She shook her head, dislodging a vacuflies, and sent them on their way, thanking them for taking good care of her. *They had done a good job,* she thought, *albeit, more than just what they were*

supposed to do. Some upgrades had occurred recently in their programming due to requests from management. Some people did not like the feeling the red goo left on the skin. Her skin was now supple and smooth, and her hair smelled like lily-of-the-valley flowers.

Faiza walked a few more steps and reached the final door in the hallway. She turned to face the door, and looked straight into its big singular eye. It looked back at her, asked, “What you want?”

“I have come for the Head of Wandjina,” said Faiza.

“What do you need it for?” said the door, its veins and arteries bulging as it spoke to her, preparing itself.

“I need the Head of Wandjina to search for the a bunch of missing artifacts,” said Faiza. “It will be crucial for my investigation.”

“Couldn’t you use a lower level artifact?” said the door, questioning her motives. No one was to be trusted upon entrance to floor seventeen, least of all, the Alpha Prime security zone regardless of job title, magical power titles, or security clearances.

“Yes, I could,” said Faiza, “but the Head of Wandjina would be quicker and more time efficient for a high priority assignment, like this one. We like to stay on good terms with Ammit. She does a good job, and we feel obliged to help her.”

“You know, just as well as I,” said the door, “what each of those artifacts do. You know which two of them you should be searching for on that list.”

“Don’t you chastise me!” said Faiza. “I am the...”

“You know that I know who you are,” said the door in a deep voice that reverberated throughout the hallway. “And, I know that despite your love of protocol, you have been caught playing with artifacts on the job just for the fun of it which is unacceptable. No one was hurt by it, but I cannot let that go. You will be required to carry a Watcher with you at all times while using the Head of Wandjina, and you will only use it to find the necessary artifacts.”

“Can’t I have fun and go on a adventure to find the rest them?” said Faiza.

“That is not in your job description,” said the door. “Let the Bureau of Artifacts handle their job, and if they cannot do that, the International Department of Magic and Public Relations will sort them out and make sure they get the artifacts back where they should be. Now, do you agree to the terms of for your usage of the Head of Wandjina?”

Grudgingly, Faiza said, “Yes, I agree.” She placed her hand quickly onto the door and felt a little prick.

Pumping in more blood, the doors veins and arteries bulged equalizing the pressure gradient between itself and the wall. The door swung open revealing a colossal dark room with a high-vaulted ceiling. Green light glowed from the floors as bioluminescent mushrooms sprouted up, highlighting the path that she was to take. Timebats and bombats swooped and flew around the room, guarding the artifacts that lined the walls and hidden in the dark shelves.

Squeak! Squeak! The timebats and bombats alerted each other of Faiza's presence.

Klunk, whirl, click! Hybrid guardians, rented out for an eternity, woke up from stasis and stood at the ready, protecting their shelves, cloaked by the shadows. Invisibility technology had been banned by the Global Citizen Science Action Network, despite the protests from the Bureau of Justice.

Following the long path through, she could hear her footsteps echo as they hit the squishy ground below. Each time she walked forward, the mushrooms behind her turned off, only letting her know where she was supposed to go- ahead.

She could see nothing but the path before her; everything else was hidden by the pitch blackness of the room. Faiza tried snapping her fingers to create a fireball to light the room up.

Apparently, the door had removed the reserves of ATP in her body; she only had what she needed for regular body functions. *Well*, thought Faiza, *the door did a good, It did its job properly.*

Continuing on her way for sometime, Faiza reached a tiny wooden pedestal that was glowing green from the mushrooms that just appeared on it. On there sat the Head of Wandjina.

It was a round spherical claylike head with two big black holes where the eyes would be, and there was no mouth.

As soon as Faiza reached out to touch the Head of Wandjina, a timebat flew down from the ceiling and landed on her shoulder.

"Greetings, my friend," said the timebat. "I will will be your Watcher until the Head of Wandjina is returned to the vault the vault." It bobbed its furry head up and down in excitement, thinking *yes I am, yes I am, and you are not going to make one wrong move. No you aren't, no you aren't.* "Nice to meet you, too," said Faiza curtly. "Do you have a name?"

"Some of my my friends call me Qamar," said the timebat. "Will you you call me Qamar? They call call me this because I am always always watching like the Moon to the Earth." It bobbed its head up and down and hopped from side to side on her shoulder, trying to be friendly. "Always always watching, always there." Qamar smiled, showing its fangs.

“Can I kill you?” said Faiza, growing tired of Qamar’s sing-songy voice and unbridle excitement.

“No no,” said Qamar and hopped ontop of Faiza’s head and hopped down onto her other shoulder. “Always there, always there.” It hopped back onto Faiza’s head and hung upside down from her bangs to look her in the eyes. “The moment anyone one or anything tries to hurt me, I blink out of time and reappear peer a few seconds later. Sorry sorry.” Qamar smiled, shaking its head up and down and up and down.

“Where are you headed?” said Qamar, hopping up and down on her head again. “Tell me! Tell me! Such fun! Ooh, ah! Makes me happy!” It spun around on her head, making a nest, and snuggled up.

“I am going to find the Heart of Osiris and the Scales of Anubis,” said Faiza. “Management won’t let me go and hunt down some of the other artifacts, only the ones pertinent to my investigation.”

“It ain’t your job, ain’t your job,” chanted Qamar. It laid on its belly and clapped its wings together, in tune. “Ain’t your job, not your business, not your business. Now get ta work!” Qamar opened its mouth and shook its head back and forth sending globules of saliva flying out of its mouth, all while saying slowly, “Geeeeeeeeeeeeeeet taaaaaaaaaaa wooooooooooork.”

She raised her hand to try and swat Qamar out of her head; it had made quite a mess. Nothing was there when her hand passed over her head.

Qamar reappeared a few seconds later. “What’d I tell tell you? Always there, always watching.” Qamar giggled and hopped down onto her right shoulder and bent its fuzzy head to the left to tickle her right ear.

“Won’t you be be my freind?” said Qamar cheerfully.

“Yes, I will,” said Faiza through gritted teeth.

“Glad glad to see we’re in agreement,” said Qamar. “Go go on, take the Head of Wandjina now now. It won’t bite you.” It giggled. “It has no mouth! Ha ha ha!” It smiled again and circled around her head to land back on her right shoulder. Qamar clapped its wings together, praising itself, and said, “Do you you like my puns? Puns of a sign of intelligence, you know. Te he he! Do you think think I am smart?” It bobbed its head up and down. “Never mind. Of course, you do. I am smart, very smart smart.”

“Just get me out of here,” said Faiza grabbing the Head of Wandjina and held it tucked under her left arm.

“Will do do!” cheered Qamar. It flapped its wings furiously and flew high up above Faiza.

“Bombat seven two four nine delta phi epsilon omega drei! I need you!” said Qamar. It stopped flapping its wings and barrel-rolled to hit Faiza’s left shoulder. Then, It shouted, “Transport mode, at the ready!”

A voice emanating from the depths of the vault replied, “Bombat seven two four nine delta phi epsilon omega drei, set to transport mode, at the ready.”

“Take us back to to the elevator and report port to back to floor seventeen teen management that the Head of Wandjina has left the floor,” said Qamar.

“Orders accepted,” said the bombat. A bright black light flashed from up above and started to blink faster. As the bombat got closer and closer, the blinking quickened, and the power of the light grew.

POW! The bombat hit Faiza square on the forehead, and black light grew to engulf Qamar and Faiza’s bodies; tendrils of swarmed around the two of them and tightened until they could barely breathe. When it felt like they could were about to burst from the pressure, they disappeared from the vault.

Blipping into existence, they reappeared inside the elevator, and the tendrils retracted, releasing them. The bombat blipped out of existence, returning to the vault to take a nap.

“Wasn’t that fun fun?” said Qamar. “Let’s let’s do that again, again!” It bounced up and down on her left shoulder, twitching its head. “What floor are we going to to? I’m having so so much fun already ready.” Qamar smiled, frowned, and smiled again.

Faiza did not speak. She pressed the button to floor thirtieth and stood there and winked at Hallbjörn. She rolled her eyes and threw a dirty look at Qamar. The red light from the security camera in the elevator blinked two times slowly and two times quickly. *Yes, I know timebats are obnoxious*, thought Hallbjörn. Faiza nodded her head in Qamar’s direction and winked again.

I’ll try, thought Hallbjörn. One of the lights was dislodged from elevator’s ceiling and fell down, shattering into pieces as it hit Faiza on the shoulder. *I tried*.

Qamar reappeared, unharmed.

“We better get a rookery of repair pair penguins in here,” said Qamar. “Hallbjörn is falling apart part.”

Qamar flew up and thrust its face in front of the security camera and grinned widely.

“They will will get you spruced up in no time,” said Qamar. It flew up to the ceiling and stuck out its tongue, licking the ceiling.

Qamar smacked its lips, and scrapped the dust off on its fangs.

“My my,” said Qamar. “You do taste pretty old old. Gathering some some dust, Hallbjörn, aren’t you?”

Landing down on Faiza’s right shoulder, Qamar whispered, “Hallbjörn is one hundred years old. I am am not surprised. His thrusters and antigravity brake locks were rather dusty, too. Those were were replaced just last year. His operating system might need an upgrade, too.”

“How do you know so much?” said Faiza. “I am the Lead Investigator at the Bureau of Justice.”

“Management isn’t just top-down like we have you believe,” said Qamar. “It runs bottom-up and independently, too.” Qamar winked at winked at Faiza.

“We take care everything and do our part, sorting out our problems as we go,” said Qamar. “We only ask you when we actually need you. We’re we’re quite efficient like that, and you wonder why the International Department of Magic and Public Relations praises you for efficiency. We cooperate and get stuff done through dynamic management. The other bureaus are run solely though top-down manageent because their head haunchos chos think they know it all. Ask them how to repair their elevators, and they they would not know the first thing to do. They’d probably just replace the whole thing; what a waste!”

Ding!

“Ooh! That’s us,” said Qamar.

With Qamar bouncing gleefully up and down on her shoulder, Faiza walked down the hallway.

Accosted by another android asking for identification, Faiza just spat in its face. It soaked up her saliva through its pores and said, “Identity confirmed! Have a nice day!”

Faiza walked up to the door to her laboratory and saw Tondra sitting in front of the sarcophagus with Faiza’s black bag and a backpack on either side of her.

“Who’s your little friend,” called Tondra.

“Its Qamar, and it is my Watcher for the duration of the time that I use the Head of Wandjina. Apparently, I play around too much,” said Faiza.

“Yes, you do,” smiled Tondra. “Remember when you almost blew up the Times Square Infinity Gateway? The International Department of Universal Transport got so upset about that; they

petitioned to have you integrated into the North American NanoStorm for putting the passengers at risk. They could have been left inside the Void, between dimensions forever, a fate almost worse than a billion years in the Narakas. At least, in the Narakas, stuff actually happens to you. Even if what happens is bad, it is most certainly better than nothing happening. Nothing for all eternity.”

“Thank you for reminding me of faults,” said Faiza.

“Trying to have fun is not a fault,” said Tondra. “Hurting other is. There is a dreaming cafe a couple blocks from here, if you want fun.”

“Enough! Are we ready to go now?” said Faiza.

“Yep! I packed your bag and mine!” said Tondra. “Know where we’re headed?”

“Not yet,” said Faiza. She walked up to Tondra and grabbed her black bag off of the floor. Faiza walked over to a lab table and opened up her bag, pulling out an Infinity Map that she bought from the Bureau of Justice’s gift shop many years ago when she had come over to tour the facility before moving out of the Bureau of Warfare.

Unfolding the map, Faiza thought about planet Earth, narrowing the scope of the Head of Wandjina’s search. After completely opening the map, she rested the Head of Wandjina on the table and thought about the Scales of Anubis.

Blinking, a yellow dot appeared in Montana.

She thought about the Heart of Osiris.

Blipping, another yellow dot appeared in Manhattan.

“We’re going to be visiting Montana and Manhattan,” said Faiza and folded up the Infinity Map. Then, she placed the map and the Head of Wandjina inside her black bag.

“Good job! Good job!” said Qamar, clapping its wings together and tilting from side to side playfully. “Which one are we going to first?”

“We’re going to Montana,” said Faiza.

She walked over to Tondra with the black bag in her right hand. Tondra got up and put her backpack on.

“Shouldn’t we put on more civilian-like clothing?” asked Tondra.

“No, don’t worry about it,” said Faiza. “It’s the Great Celebration! There are going to be people everywhere pretending to be members of the different bureaus in the International Department of Magic and Public Relations. It’s all chill! They will think we’re just really hardcore fans. We look so much like Faiza and Tondra; they will think we’re wearing very good costumes and makeup. Maybe we will get to give recommendations to other party-goers on where to go for disguises like ours. It will be so much fun!”

“Yes, yes! Fun! Fun!” said Qamar jumping up and down. “You won’t get in trouble. No, no, you won’t!”

“Qamar seems to know what is going on,” said Tondra. “You might want to heed its advice. Qamar is your Watcher after all.”

“Yes, yes I am,” said Qamar. “I am all yours yours, and I will be always watching, always there.” Qamar smiled.

“Tondra, hold my hands,” said Faiza and think with me about Montana.

They held hands, and thought about wonderful Montana Rockies, the blistering cold yet beautiful Glacier National Park, Yellowstone National Park, the nice cozy hotsprings hidden scattered throughout the Rocky Mountains, the geothermal beds beneath Montana’s soil, and as their thoughts formed a distinct idea of what Montana was, a prismatic portal opened up beneath. Slowly, they sank into the portal.

“Pretty pretty lights!” exclaimed Qamar. “Very pretty! Nicer, much nicer than teleportation by bombats.”

“I am glad you think so,” said Faiza, trying not to lose focus on where she was going.

A colorful portal opened up above the dome of Montana’s capital building, and they fell onto the dome, sliding down and landed in the grass, knocking a few party-goers down.

WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOSSSSSSSSSSSSHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!

Beating the reins up and down, Moana commanded the carriage to fly through the air faster and for the cyborg horses to take extra precautions to make sure that they did not get killed by the pressure gradient.

Megafalcons flew along back and forth along the red lines of light that blazed in front of and behind Moana and Simon’s carriage. The megafalcons made sure that everyone stayed in their lanes, did not get lost, or get into an accident. Simon marveled at their big yellow talons with sharp titanium tips at the end of them, perfect for catching anything. Their wings were about six meters wide, and their plumage was filled with a bazillion multipurpose feathers that could be

activated at their own discretion- one for every possible scenario: bombings, hijackings, sleepy pilots, disruptive passengers, out of control vehicles, etc, As Simon looked at them, they stared back, analyzing his and Moana's every move.

As they flew further south, they caught a glimpse of the Montana State Capital Building with its big metal dome stretching up into the sky. Simon and Moana could hear the party-goers singing "For We Have Won, May We Live in Peace!" to the tune of "I Was Drunk At the Infinity Gate When My Android Left Me For the Revolution!"

Kinda ironic, thought Simon, and he chuckled. However, that was hard to see through the living hybrid bowler hat covering the lower half of his face.

"Moana," said Simon, "Where are we headed, and how much longer until we get there?"

"It will be about five hours if we don't get pulled over for an inspection by the North American Air Sky Police," said Moana. "Otherwise, it might be, say, six or seven hours or more depending on how many times we get pulled over."

"Have you ever been pulled over before?" said Simon.

"Oh, usually about once or twice a month," said Moana. "Faiza has been calling the Director of idMPR to ramp up inspections so that less artifacts are floating around in the hands of the public where they do not belong."

"It would be quicker you just let me teleport us, or use an Infinity Gate," said Simon.

"Try teleporting right now," said Moana.

Simon furrowed his eyebrows together in deep concentration, thinking of all the warm and fuzzy memories he had of his homestead and life with Tony.

Nothing happened.

"What did you do to me?" said Simon, exasperated with Moana's trickery.

"I did what I had to do," said Moana "to make sure that you got to your Dating Site on time. Smell the card."

Simon sniffed it, and it did smell rather funny.

"What did you lace it with" said Simon.

“Oh, something weak enough to not kill, but strong enough to waste all your magic repairing the damage,” said Moana. “I used the roses to prick your fingers, allowing the juice of the castor bean to get inside of you.”

“It will be about twenty-four hours before you are fully charged again,” she said. “That is long enough for you to go on a few hundred dates before your time to find a new partner is up.”

“Thank you so much,” said Simon sarcastically. “All I needed was someone like you to bring me there.”

“You’re welcome!” said Moana. “I am more than happy to be at your service, or yours at mine.”

Back in the Lincoln Center in Manhattan, New York, Jun and her gang were deciding what to do next.

“I’m hungry,” complained Gorica, speaking a little louder than necessary.

“Does anyone else feel hungry?” asked Jun, hoping that they did not have to waste too much time on it.

“I agree with Gorica,” said Betje, thrusting her right arm up into the air to call attention to herself which made up for her small stature.

“Me too,” said Kai, moving his left hand in a circle around his tan abs. “I feel empty in here.”

“Agreed,” said Kojo, patting his stomach.

“Me too!” chimed in Aucaman thumping his chest with his fist.

“Where do you all want you want to go?” said Jun.

“I vote to go to Cafe Morpheus, down by the Hotel Phantasos,” said Gorica. “They have really good Mekhong Whiskey infused with distilled lucid dreams.”

“What about the Benjami Bar?” said Betje. “Their chibuku with a side of caramelized grasshopper legs is to die for.”

“We could just go to Infinity Bar, hidden in a tiny pocket universe, about an eighth of a klick away,” said Kojo. “They have buzzlebapper binjo bobs in starglass, and they play music derived from stray signals that are emitted from the Beyond into Kay Pacha.”

“Your tastes are too bizarre for me,” said Aucaman. “I would prefer a nice cup of sassafras tea with a spoon of honey and maybe, just maybe, a waking dream, if we can find a good one. There is a god tea shop north of here called Too Late Tea”

“I agree with Aucaman on that one,” said Kai. “I would like something a little milder like a Hawaiian Sea Breeze with a prophetic dream.”

“I think I know just where to go,” said Jun, “a place that all of you will be able to enjoy. It goes by the name Cafe Mani. They are located tucked away at the back end of the Android Amphitheater, just a brisk walk east of here.”

“What do they have?” said Gorica.

“For starters, they have the best baklava and turkish midnight delight in the entire world,” said Jun.

“I don’t care for turkish delights, anytime of the day they were made for,” said Kojo. “Do they have anything else, maybe a meal.”

“They have good lumpias and pupusas, too” said Jun. “Their motto is ‘If you can dream it, we got it!’ so I am pretty sure they will have anything you need to satisfy your hunger.”

“Sounds great!” said Gorica,

“I’m all in for it!” said Kai. “I am going to be sure to get the best Hawaiian Sea Breeze in the world.”

“I’m in, too!” replied Betje, in a loud happy voice.

“Me too!” said Aucaman.

“Alright!” said Jun “Let’s try and make this quick, if we can. We have better things to be doing with our time.”

“You never can enjoy the little things in life, can you?” said Gorica. “You always have to be busy doing this or doing that. If you wanted to be so efficient, you should have become a hybrid of some sort by now.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Jun. “Just come with me. I will watch over you all while you eat and drink. So, Jun led the way and guided them eastwards through the crowd bumping into partygoers and merchants, alike. Some of them tried charging Jun for knocking down a few of their wares, but as soon as she glared at them they backed off.

It was easy for Jun to spot the entrance to Cafe Mani; it was the only place with grass and herbs growing around the the Android Amphitheater’s shiny metallic walls. Pacing around the building

were four meter high androids, long spindly legs cutting through and stepping over the partygoers.

Jun trailed around the front of the building, dodging the androids' legs, and slipped with her crew in tow down the side of the building. She stepped onto the patch of grass and knocked on the door.

A rectangular piece of metal slid back, revealing two eyes, one robotic and one human.

"Who is this?" said the hybrid woman.

"Code dva nau," said Jun, "Auriga has slain Orion."

"Welcome, my fellow Virgo," said the hybrid woman, flaring her gills for effect.

"I see you got some more upgrades," said Jun, "since the last time I met you, Zlata."

"Yeah, I wanted a bionic eye to replace the one I lost," said Zlata. "I spent a few extra points to buy one with extra special features. I can now see x-ray, ultraviolet, infrared, gamma rays, and things up to one nanometer small or one terameter away."

"That is quite impressive," said Jun.

"I know," said Zlata, "it focuses automatically, too. The technology has gotten really cheap. I could do a full body makeover into any type of hybrid crossover combination I want with just the points I earn from a month's worth of work. I've just been replacing my parts as I break them, with the exception of my gills and third eyelids."

"Been doing any diving lately?" said Jun.

Gorica thumped her foot on the floor impatiently; they were still standing outside the doorway.

"Yes, I have been working a few gigs for the International Department on Marine Biology," said Zlata. "I find the ocean to be very calming. I have been studying the cleanup efficiency of magnetic eels on stray nanobots."

"Ahem!" said Gorica from behind the Mask of Zorya. "Please may we be seated. It was most pleasurable to meet your friend, Jun, but all of us are hungry. You can talk more with her when we are done. We are ready now."

"Right this way," said Zlata, leading them through the misty cafe, warning them to not step on any of their tinier guests munching around on the open floor. Food grew freely on the floor without complaint, for the ground of the cafe had been built on was blessed by Gaia millions of

years ago when she roamed the Earth freely amongst its inhabitants. Zlata brought them up to a living willow round table that had been arborsculptured into an intricate swirling pattern, like several celtic knots all interconnected.

“Anything I can get you all while you choose your main course?” said Zlata as she handed a digital menu to each member of Jun’s team as they team their place at the table. The screens of the menus glowed as they displayed foods from far and foreign worlds and countries. On Jun’s menu, the first thing to appear was a stir-fried jackal-cow infused with the zeeple juice. It looked appetizing except for the still beating heart on the top of the dish.

“I would like to have a Hawaiian Sea Breeze,” said Kai “carbonated with fresh air from the Pacific Ocean, please. A dash of sea salt around the rim of the glass would do nicely, too.”

“Do you have any tea?” said Aucaman.

“Sure!” said Zlata. “Anything you want specifically, or would you a Taste of Everything?”

“Sassafras tea with honey would be fine,” said Aucaman. “No dreams and no infusions. Just good traditional tea, thank you.”

“Are you sure?” said Zlata. “We have the best dreams available in our cafe.”

“Do you have any pleasant waking dreams?” said Aucaman cautiously. He tended to stay away from dream bars because things could go downhill quickly if one did not know how to handle a Mare or the Sandman.

“We have celebratory pow wow in the cellar that has been fermenting for a few hundred years,” said Zlata. “Would that be of interest to you?”

“Have your dreams been certified by the Dream Makers International Corporation as safe for human consumption?” said Aucaman,

“Not all of them,” said Zlata, “but most of them have been approved for hybrids, androids, cyborgs, and anything nonhuman or human plus.”

“Do you have any registered biochemimagical, cybernetic, or other parts installed?,” said Zlata. “Or do you still have just the default hardware on?”

“I have just the default hardware on,” said Aucaman, slightly offended by how she phrased that.

“Ah, you’re one of those people like Jun,” said Zlata. “She is always trying to find pure humans like herself. I do not get why doesn’t even try the simplest of upgrades, like a tiny brain implant to connect to the Universal Library and the UltraNet.”

“She is preserving the integrity of the human genome!” said Aucaman.

“There is nothing to preserve,” said Zlata. “The human race is no more special than any other species in the universe. You’re a dying breed. Adapt and change, or die out. That is the way things have worked and always will. Change is the only constant in the universe.”

Zlata took a deep breath in and purged her mind of her anger.

“I have cancelled the addition of the celebratory pow wow to your drink, sir,” said Zlata. “Anything else you all would like?”

“No thanks,” said Kojo.

“No thank you,” said Gorica, “I’ll hold my stomach for the main course.”

“I would like a chibuku,” said Betje, “and some fried scorpion.”

“That can arranged for you.” said Zlata.

She walked away, disappearing into the misty air of the cafe. Lights of many different colors bounced off of the droplets hanging in the air, creating beautiful rainbows everywhere.

Jun and her team looked around the cafe to see what kind of people went there.

Sitting at the bar, were two human-machine hybrids sticking their fingers into an electrical socket in the wall, getting high off of the alternating current. Their heads were tilted back as the electricity coursed through their bodies, and when the charge built up too much, they would ask the bar man for a rubber square which they would discharge the electricity into.

To the left of them was human-fish hybrids with his head submerged in a tank full of super oxygenated water. When he lifted out his head out of the tank, he quickly shook the water off, disturbing the hybrids beside him a little bit, and wrote down profound thoughts on a waterproof legal pad beside him.

Beneath everyone, garter snakes slithered through the grass, herbs, and vegetables growing on the floor to devour the mice that scampered and pranced through the cafe. It was a pretty sight, indeed. La, de, da, di, de! Mice prancing through the leaves; garter snake comes in and eats as he pleases. Om nom nom! Mice nowhere to be seen!

Less violently, two praying mantises were humping each other on a flower, and the female mantis snapped off the head of male praying mantis, leaving his corpse there in the grass to decompose now that his job was done.

Hanging from the ceiling of the cafe, hundreds of people were on the 'second floor' of the cafe, a mirror image of everything on the 'first floor' just upside down- a good way of saving space by reversing the polarity of an antigravity flux capacitor.

People chatting, eating, drinking, and they waved and smiled towards the people on the 'first floor' who stared up at them. One had to be drunk to still be impressed with antigravity technology, and quite a few people in the cafe were. There was much waving back and forth amongst the two 'floors' of the cafe.

As people on the first floor got bored, they dinged the bell on their table, and the tree limbs that were their chairs wrapped tightly around the, sucking them into the floor and brought them up at a random new location inside the cafe. Greeting their new found table mates, they lifted their chins at each other and thumped their left chests with their right hands, acknowledging the other person. They would then proceed to talking about their day, where they came from, how long they would be on Earth, and when they were going to the Infinity Gate again and where they would go next.

The Infinity Gates were extremely well-maintained by the International Department of Universal Transport; they had entire teams dedicated to preserving the integrity of the teleports between the gates. Unless one was a higher ranking sorcerer or sorceress, it was hard to maintain the integrity of one's teleport, making it risky business to teleport alone, giving others a chance of intercepting one before reaching one's specified destination. Not too long ago, in the news, an android was intercepted during teleport by a man shrouded in darkness, demanding three million points and a secure connection to on the Infinity Gate Network to the Bootes Void. The demands were met, and the android lived; however, the man in darkness was routed to the event horizon of a black hole, dying in space. He had forgotten to check the destination of the Infinity gate in his fervor to get away.

Meanwhile, in Helena, Montana, for some reason humans get sentimental and like to keep the names to places the same over the centuries, Faiza, with Qamar hopping up and down on her shoulder, and Tondra were running through the crowd of partygoers trying to find a place to rest and take out the Sun-Crown of the Dievas, a weaker searching artifact compared to that of the Head of Wandjina.

"Hey girls!," yelled a partygoer. "What is that batty thing on your shoulder? Do you know where I can get one of those?"

"Visit the morgue sometime!" said Faiza. "They sprout from the ears of dead old men who were slain in battle."

“How rude rude!” said Qamar, jumping ontop of Faiza’s head and onto her other shoulder. He licked and bit her right ear angrily, trying to piss her off. Faiza just giggled. Then, Qamar chomped down hard and she yelped.

“Damn you!” said Faiza.

“I be be damned for sure,” said Qamar. “You you need to get to work and stop stop chatting.” Qamar jumped back onto Faiza’s head and danced around, waving and twirling strands of her hair while doing so. It placed a strand of her hair over its nose, making a false mustache, and hung upside down to look at Faiza in the eyes.

“Peekabo! Peekabo!” said Qamar, lowering its voice, “Ha ha ha!” Qamar flicked Faiza in the nose with her hair.

“Cut it out!” said Faiza.

Qamar chomped on the strand of hair and burped.

“Not bad, tastes tastes like sugar,” said Qamar.

Faiza sighed.

“Did I ever tell you that you are just the most precious thing I have ever met?” said Faiza, trying to trick Qamar.

“Do you really think that?” said Qamar.

“Yes, I do,” said Faiza. “Will my good little Watcher be a good timebat and be mature like the great timebat you will grow up to be? Can you play adult for me?”

“Yes sir!” said Qamar, hopping down onto Faiza’s right shoulder, giving her a salute.

“I said adult, sir,” said Faiza, “not military. Not all adults are in the military, in fact, we need less and less personnel in the armed forces as our technology and magical techniques get better. Can you be an adult, sir?”

“Yes es, mother,” said Qamar, trying to be sweet.

“Good timebat,” said Faiza. “Mother is now going to get out the Sun-Crown of the Dievas and locate the Scales of Anubis.”

Seeing a tall hedgerow of natal plums, Faiza and Tondra ducked behind it. Faiza set down her black bag and extracted the Sun-Crown of the Dievas and put it on. She thought of the Scales and the Sun-Crown pointed her northwest; that would be the way they would travel. So, Faiza,

the smart person she is, grabbed out two Eggs of Ilmatar from her black bag and cracked one over her head and one over Tondra's head. As the egg yolks dribbled down their heads, their bodies began to fade and turn into smoke.

"What about me me?" said Qamar.

Faiza grabbed a third Egg of Ilmatar from her black bag and cracked that over Qamar. She placed the eggshells back inside her black bag for when they were down with them. Afterwards, Faiza wiped some of the egg yolk onto her black bag, making it turn into smoke, too.

One big smoke cloud, wavering between the Montana capital building's wall and a hedge, drifted up into the sky and drifted northwest.

"This this is so cool," said Qamar.

"You are welcome," said Faiza. "Maybe I will borrow more high-level artifacts in the future and play with them to ensure that I get a Watcher. Then, you can request for me." She rolled her eyes and sighed. *I would not have to put up with this kind of creature if I was in the Bureau of Warfare, thought Faiza. Best if I stick to protocol, then I will never have to be with Qamar or any other timebat again.*

Warming up their backs, they drifted lazily through the sky, enjoying the sensation of ducks and planes and NanoSurges rushing through their bodies- a strange ticklish sensation.

Pulling out the Sun-Crown of the Dievas, again, Faiza checked that they were on course. They were, just a few more clicks to go. Faiza grabbed a silver foot-shaped charm from her bag and attached it to the Sun-Crown, telling it to beep when they have reached the location of the Scales.

Far off, flying over Mackinac Island, Simon and Moana were stopped by the North American Sky Police.

"Hello madame," said the NanoMan. "What is your name and profession?"

"I am Moana, a representative from the Bureau of Population Management," said Moana. "I greet people who have lost loved ones and bring them to Dating Sites to ensure that they get a fair chance to find a new partner within the next twenty-four hours."

"Do you have proof of your identification and status?" said the NanoMan, extending the palm of his out towards her.

"Yes, I do," said Moana, and she spit into the NanoMan's palm. "There you go." It processed her DNA and checked the International DNA Database for her name; the two matched. Then, it

scanned the saliva for percent magical energy per mass, and checked that with the International Magical Energy Database, and it matched again.

“You are Moana from the Bureau of Population Management,” said the NanoMan, “Who are you delivering today?”

“I am delivering Simon the AUM,” said Moana.

“That is quite a claim you have there, missy. Simon the AUM has not left his house in Montana for years. Can you provide proof of his identity?” said the NanoMan, extending his palm towards Simon.

“Yes, I can,” said Moana. “Simon, do like I did.”

He spit into the NanoMan’s palm, and it checked his DNA and percent magical energy per mass against the corresponding databases, and they matched perfectly.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Simon,” said the NanoMan.

It turned into a nanocloud and floated through all the parts of the carriage and the cyborg horses, inspecting them all for broken parts.

It reappeared again as a NanoMan.

“Your horses are missing a frontal lobe circuit and negative emotional feedback loop,” said the NanoMan. “You need to get those two parts within the next five days. Your horses will be at risk of binge eating and binge recharging during the Winter if you do not get that fixed. How long have they been like this?”

“I do not know,” said Moana.

“You should be checking the condition of your mode of transport at least once a week,” said the NanoMan. “I will have someone from the International Department of Universal Transport check up with you and your horses once a week for the next six weeks to make sure you are following your duties for proper care and maintenance of your mode of transport. Otherwise, you will stuck to using public transportation, It, honestly, is not that bad, but it might make it harder for you to meet your deadlines and help your clients.”

“Thank you, officer,” said Moana. “I appreciate your service and care.”

“You’re welcome,” said the NanoMan, and he disappeared, reintegrating back into the North American Sky Police’s designated section of the North American NanoStorm.

“See that was not so bad, was it?” said Moana.

“No,” said Simon. “Just take me to my Dating Site so I can get this over with.”

Moana snapped beat the reins against the horses, throttling the carriage into full thrust, and they flew off as fast they could go.

It got hotter around them as their speeds increased, and light was given off. They looked like a speeding asteroid through the skies above Minnesota and Michigan, and all was right in the world; they were heading down their proper lane in the sky; the hyperfalcons glanced at them suspiciously, as they do with everyone. They were on their way! Simon was going to get himself a new partner!

In Cafe Mani, Betje had just received her chibuku, light milky brown, in a crystal goblet with a spoon. With it, Zlata handed her a plate of fried scorpion, small reddish shell and tender.

“Enjoy!” said Zlata, after handing Betje her fried scorpion appetizer and chibuku. Zlata walked over to Aucaman with a saucer and cup of sassafras tea and honey.

“Here you go, sir,” said Zlata politely, bending down to put the tea down at Aucaman’s place. Steam rose gently from his tea, and the sweet aroma of sassafras with a hint of honey permeated the air, calming everyone down, making their visit more enjoyable.

Zlata walked around the table, again, to get to Kai while holding his Hawaiian Sea Breeze, deep pink with a pineapple chunk sticking on the side of the glass, in her hands. She handed it to Kai, who took the glass and smiled.

“Thank you,” said Kai. He sniffed the glass and smiled widely. “I get nostalgic smelling the Pacific Breeze.” He took a sip, gulping down the Pacific Ocean air that was used to carbonate his drink: it was tasty sweet and salty. *Mhmmm*, thought Kai.

“Anybody ready to order their main course, yet?” said Zlata.

“Yes,” replied Jun. “I would like some sweet and sour pork with fried rice, eggdrop soup, and rice pudding. Do you have any fried liver or a hot pot course?”

“Yes, of course we do,” said Zlata. “We have every type of food in the universe. Would you like both of them?”

“Yes please,” said Jun. “I am going to be extra hungry, tonight.”

“Isn’t this all a little much for one person?” said Zlata.

“No, we are going to be burning all of these calories tonight, without leaving the table,” said Jun and smiled.

“I see,” said Zlata and smiled. “I will have the Collective Dream infusions ready for you all soon.”

“Anything the rest of you all would like?” said Zlata.

“I would like a glass of coconut milk and poisson cru,” said Kai.

“Will do,” said Zlata. Turning to face Betje, Zlata asked, “What can I get you madame?”

“I would like some bitterballen and bamigoreng,” said Betje.

“What kind of meat would you like in your bitterballen?” said Zlata.

“I would like chopped beef,” said Betje.

“And for you?” said Zlata, facing Kojo.

“Kitfo, Niter kebbeh served with crackers, and dabo kolo,” said Kojo.

“And you?” said Zlata, turning to Aucaman.

“Buffalo stew, succotash, and pumpkin bread,” said Aucaman.

“Wow, all of you are quite hungry,” said Zlata. “Our cyber chefs will be busy making your meals.”

Lastly, turning to Gorica, Zlata said, “What can I get this lady in a mask?”

“Avgolemono, arni souvlakia, frouta ke yaorti, and melopitta,” said Gorica.

“All of this will be on the house,” said Zlata. “My friend, Jun, has helped Cafe Mani and its chefs find the most amazing fresh ingredients in the universe has to offer. Her missions have made the critiques of our food very happy, happy to know that some places still offer fresh food despite the ease of creating food from base matter with an InstaFood 5000.”

“I did not know that about!” said Gorica, shocked to learn yet another new thing about Jun. “You are more versatile in your skill set than I thought.”

“Yeah, and you all dragged me here, so I may as well stuff myself,” said Jun. “We will need a lot of calories soon, especially me.”

“Glad you have come to your senses,” said Gorica. “You aren’t an android yet, so long as we can get you to eat!” She smiled behind the mask.

“Any last orders for the friends of my friend?” said Zlata.

“No thank you,” said Jun. “This should do.”

“Okay. Your meals should be ready in about forty-five minutes,” said Zlata. “The Collective Dreams should be here in five minutes.” Zlata walked away from their table and disappeared once more into the mist of Cafe Mani.

Jun bent down to her side and picked up her snake leather bag and placed it on the table. After pulling back the handles to open it, Jun touched the Heart of Osiris with her hand. It was alive and content. Going thump, squish, thump,, squish, thump, thump, squish, squish. She rummaged around her bag some more, and pulled out an Infinity Map, then closed the bag, placing it on the floor.

She unfolded the tan much crinkled and worn Infinity Map onto the table. All the galaxies and stars in the known universe glimmered on the map, shining and blinking as stars were born and destroyed.

Thinking of Earth in her head, the Infinity Map zoomed in and showed the Earth rotating on its axis with the Moon and the Sun in the background.

“Cool map you have there,” said Zlata as she returned to their table with a tray with six glasses full of Collective Dreams floating in them. “I remember when Jun used to take that map out all the time.”

She walked over to each of them in turn, handing them a glass full of the magical blueish white foggy concoction.

“Have fun!” said Zlata. As she disappeared into the mist, she said, “Your meals will be ready in about forty minutes from now.”

“Bottoms up!” said Jun, raising her glass of a Collective Dream to her mouth.

“Bottoms up!” said the rest of her team in unison, and everyone laid one hand on the Infinity Map and one hand on their artifact.

Drifting on for what seemed like ages, the charm attached to the Sun-Crown of the Dievas inside of Faiza’s black bag started beeping.

BEEP! BEEEP! BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!!!!!!!!!!!!

One of the hypefalcons way above heard the noise, and gazed down suspiciously, looking for the source of the beeping, but all it saw was a cloud of smoke drifting towards a forest north of Missoula, Montana.

“Calm down!” said Faiza as she started to open her bag.

“Is the fun about about to begin?” said Qamar, eagerly floating from side to side around Faiza’s head.

[illegible]

Faiza stuck her hand viciously into her black bag, pulled out the Sun-Crown of the Dievas, yanked off the charm which she promptly melted to liquid in her hands.

“There, there,” said Faiza, “all done.” She turned to look at Qamar.

“Yes, the fun is about to begin!” said Faiza.

As soon as she said that, they crossed the invisible barrier to Simon's property, and entire food forest and its inhabitants went into red alert, their unsavory intent was noticed immediately.

“Attention!” said the Great Baobab across all frequencies in the food forest network, through the mycelium network, through the flies, through the bees, through everything but voice, the preparations were being made.

A storm cloud formed and brewed, starting from where the epicenter of the food forest, the Great Baobab Tree, it expanded to encircle the food forest and Simon's homestead. The clouds grew thick and dense, full of electricity, and began to flow down in columns to create two domes around the property- one at the true property lines to prevent the intruders from leaving and another dome with a radius a few meters smaller to prevent them from going further.

Faiza, Qamar, and Tondra collided with the inner dome with an inglorious thud and came plummeting down to the ground, as themselves; the magic in the stormclouds had deactivated the Eggs of Ilmatar, causing the egg yolks to be sucked back up, returned to the eggs, and the eggshells repaired.

“He he! Woah!!!!” said Qamar catchig himself from the fall.

Faiza quickly thought of growing wings and thought the same for Tondra, expending a lot of her energy, they both flapped their large wings fervently and landed graciously on the ground of the food forest.

Their wings disappeared and Faiza pulled an syringe filled with ATP out of her bag and stabbed it into her neck, injecting herself with a large dose of ATP, making up for the energy she had used. Tondra just pulled out a super granola bar from her backpack and started eating it, getting energy stored in her body, ready to use later. She pulled out another super granola bar from her backpack and offered it to Faiza; then, she offered one to Qamar.

“Thank you,” said Faiza. “I am glad you had such forethought to do this.”

“Thankie thankie,” said Qamar, fluttering up and down in place between Faiza and Tondra. getting jittery from the energy, Qamar started shaking its head back and forth and vibrating its wings rapidly.

“Attention!” said the Great Baobab Tree, in a loud deep voice audible to humans and timebats. It lowered the visual illusion that was hiding the domes and let darkness cover them, letting them see the colossal storm clouds tense with electricity swirl around them on either side.

“You have entered the property of Simon the AUM,” said the Great Baobab Tree. “Why have you come here?”

“We have come here for the Scales of Anubis,” said Faiza.

“You are going to have to take it by force,” said the Great Baobab Tree. “Simon owns them now.”

“They belonged to the Bureau of Artifacts,” said Faiza. “He will be charged with the murder of a Spawn of Ammit; if you help us, we will not press charges against you, only Simon.”

The Great Baobab Tree thrust the inner dome up against Faiza, Tondra, and Qamar.

“You have my answer!” said the Great Baobab Tree. “I will protect the one who gave me life, the one who gave me power.”

Sensing the amount of power that the Great Baobab Tree was using, feeling its at Faiza and its love for him.

Simon asked, “Do you have anything to eat? I am hungry.”

“Yes,” said Moana, tossing Simon a muffin without looking back.

“Thank you,” said Simon, and he removed the bowler hat from his face quickly and devoured the muffin.

Poof!

Simon cast the Forbidden Spell that Brahma had taught him for the first time and vanished from the carriage and reappeared in the Beyond.

Turning around, Moana saw that Simon had vanished. *Damn it!* she thought.

“SO BE IT!” said Faiza, pulling out the Turtle of Amana from her black bag. She bent over quickly and powered up the artifact, sending a stream of blue light from her body into the green turtle shell. It grew and expanded in size, and Tondra pulled out an ATP syringe from her backpack and stabbed it into Faiza’s leg to prevent her from running out of energy. The Turtle of Amana grew to be the size of a regular office desk, and Faiza jumped onto the top of its back, standing tall. Opening her black bag again, as the winds of the inner dome pushed closer, Faiza tossed Tondra the Joan of Arc’s Suit of Armor. Tondra hurriedly put that on and stuffed her face with as many super granola bars as she could. With Joan of Arc’s Suit of Armor on, Tondra tossed Faiza the rest of her ATP syringes, as it would be too difficult to try and use them with the Suit of Armor on. While Faiza was pulling out another artifact from her black bag, Tondra climbed up onto the back of the Turtle of Amana. Faiza handed her the Sword of Tamusi.

Slashing and slicing, Tondra invoked the Sword’s power and cut through the inner dome’s storm cloud, but every time she cut a hole in the dome, it quickly regenerated back in place. As the legs and head of the Turtle of Amana exited the turtle shell, a voice asked, “Who is Amana, my commander?”

“I will be Amana,” said Faiza, and her legs were turned into a mermaid tail. She flopped down onto the Turtle and told it what they were going to do.

As Tondra stood in front of Faiza cutting through the inner dome’s cloud and shielding Faiza and Qamar from the pummeling winds and lightning strikes, Faiza said, “NOW!”

Water rose up from beneath the Turtle and carried them all, faster than a tsunami, through the hole in the inner dome that Tondra had made, and then rode gallantly into the food forest.

The Turtle of Amana spun around as they crashed through the inner dome, Tondra and Faiza held onto the Turtle tightly, and Qamar flapped around like mad to not drown but gave up and let himself blink out of time for a moment.

Speaking on only the human and bat audible frequencies, the Great Baobab Tree said, “Get ready, another dome is going up, tactics must be changed now that they can get through the domes.”

Quickly, hordes of monkeys armed themselves with the seedpods of the sandbox tree; ravens dipped their beaks in the oozing sap being released from the sandbox trees willingly; pigs went into beast mode, growing long teeth; the grapevines turned sour, releasing noxious dark green

fumes into the air; Asian carp jumped violently in the suntraps; squirrels gathered valerian leaves and coated themselves in its juices, ready to knock people out.

Sucked through the inner dome, the outer dome came inside and became the new inner dome, whirling and spinning, crackling and rippling with lightning, ready to push Faiza and Tondra back again.

Shoving violently, the inner dome pushed Faiza and Tondra back up against the outer dome.

Reaching back to her black bag, Faiza retrieved the Fire of Morimi, a vial filled with the eternal fires.

Faiza whispered to the Turtle of Amana, giving it new instructions.

Rushing from the Turtle in all directions, a torrent of water gushed from them and filled the space between the inner and outer domes. They floated like logs up to the top of the inner dome, and Faiza uncorked the vial, releasing the Fire of Morimi. It collided with and consumed the stem water in between the two domes and produced so much pressure from the rapid creation of steam that it knocked both the inner and out dome down. Now that the deed was done, Faiza called the Fire of Morimi back into the vial and put the cork back on. Then, she slipped it into her lab coat's pocket.

“Attack!” commanded the Great Baobab Tree, as the Faiza and Tondra on the back of the Turtle fell down into the Circle of Feastings, too close for the Great baobab Tree’s comfort.

Monkeys, armed with sandbox tree seedpods and followed by monkey’s armed with water-filled arrows, rampaged through the trees towards the Circle of Feastings.

“Fire the sandbox seedpods!” yelled the lead monkey, pounding on his chest.

Tiny pumpkin-shaped seedpods flew through the air towards the Turtle of Amana.

“Fire the water-arrows!” yelled the lead monkey.

Water-filled arrows hurtled through the air, chasing the sandbox seedpods, and made contact. The arrows broke, releasing their water onto the seedpods, all at once.

Flying up into the air and out of control, the Turtle flew spun wildly in the air, towards the suntraps. Faiza and Tondra were knocked off of the Turtle and flew in the opposite direction, straight towards the Great Baobab Tree.

Crunch! The Asian carp in one of the suntraps pulverized the Turtle of Amana's shell which broke off, leaving the softer inside of the Turtle fully exposed. It was mullered to death by the Asian carp, deactivating the artifact forever.

In midair, Faiza stopped flapping her mermaid tail around and got her legs back. Thinking quickly, she thought of being a magnet and Tondra was pulled towards Faiza. They held onto each other tightly, with Tondra's back facing the Great Baobab Tree.

BANG!!!!!!

They collided with the Great Baobab Tree, shattering Joan of Arc's Suit of Armor, its magic saving them from almost certain death. The Great Baobab Tree's magic repelled them, sending them back to the outer edge of Circle of Feastings.

"Under no circumstance," said the The Great Baobab Tree to all of its loyal defenders, "No one is to get to Simon's house! Do whatever it takes!"

Losing her energy, trying to repair herself and save Tondra from their fall, Faiza pulled out another syringe of ATP and injected herself with it.

Feeling a new wave of energy, Faiza thought about clouds and a nice soft cloud appeared beneath them cushioning their fall.

"Whoopie oopie!" yelled Qamar circling around Faiza and Tondra.

Swoosh! Peck!

A raven flew right where Qamar was, making it blink out of existence for a moment.

"Close ose one!" siad Qamar and opened its mouth wide, smiling. "Thiiiiiiiiiiiiisssssss is sooooooooooooo muuuuuuuuuuuuccccchhhhh fuuuuuuuuuuuuuun!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Spit flew from Qamar's mouth in all directions, globules landing onto Faiza and Tondra's hair.

"Charge!" directed the Great Baobab Tree.

A horde of feral pigs barreled through the food forest, the thumping of their feet and snorting could be heard. As the sound grew louder, Faiza rummaged hurriedly through her black bag, searching for the right artifact.

Thump! Snort! Snort! Thump, thump, snort, thump, snort, thump, snort!

Quickly approaching them at an ever increasing pace, Faiza finally found it. She pulled out Glooscap's Bag, a very large bag, wide enough at the mouth that an adult human could walk in standing upright.

Faiza and Tondra stretched the bag's mouth in front of the path they thought the feral pigs were going to take.

Crunching, snapping, leaves and branches were trampled as the feral pigs with their loong sharp teeth stampeded toward them. Faiza, blue light emanating from her hands, coaxed the Glooscap's bag into opening wider, and the feral pigs ran straight into the bag. Hurriedly, Faiza and Tondra pulled the drawstring shut, trapping the feral pigs inside the bag, unable to escape.

"Well done didly done done!" cheered Qamar from above, impressed by their great teamwork.

Strangler figs climbed through the food forest, lashing out one root after the other, swinging through the canopy to get to the Circle of Feastings.

Encircling Faiza and Tondra from above, the strangler figs shot their roots all around Faiza and Tondra, trapping them in a cage of living wood. They barred them from above, below, and all around, separating Faiza and Tondra from the black bag. Qamar was stuck outside of cage, flabbergasted at what just happened.

"You're you're trapped!" said Qamar, in total shock.

"No duh!" said Faiza.

Jumping down from the canopy, one of the monkeys snatched Faiza's black bag, ran to the Great Baobab tree, and dropped the bag there for the Great Baobab Tree to use.

Bark peeled slowly off of the Great Baobab Tree, landing in a pile beside the black bag. Teak-colored light shimmered from the base of the Great Baobab Tree as it extended its magical energies and life force into the bark. Swirling into a ball, the ball of bark floated in the air. It was squeezed at the sides and squashed into a cylinder which was further divided into five smaller cylinders. Two small cylinders at the bottom, one rounder in the middle, two thinner cylinders sticking out of the sides of the middle cylinder, with a sphere on the top of it all.

More light poured from the Great Baobab Tree into the array of cylinders with a sphere on top, and it took on a humanoid shape. The Great Baobab Tree now had its own Avatar, and the Avatar of the Great Baobab Tree bent down and picked up what was once Faiza's black bag in its hands.

Thinking quickly, fearing what the Great Baobab Tree might do, Faiza pulled out the vial containing the Fire of Morimi from her pocket and grabbed Tondra's hand.

“This artifact was not meant to do this, at least not with people, so we'll have to make this quick,” said Faiza.

Faiza thought about becoming one with the ocean and mist and water on the earth and channeled the spell into Tondra. Together, their bodies gurgled and bubbled as every atom, every molecule, every cell in their bodies turned into pure water.

Splish! Splash! Two columns of water fell straight down onto the ground, and at the same time, the vial containing the Fire of Morimi fell onto the ground of the food forest, releasing a gushing spout of fire that vaporized the water containing Faiza and Tondra, sending them up through the strangler fig cage as steam.

Propelled by the still blazing Fire of Morimi, they shot up into the air, far above the canopy of the food forest. After they had drifted, pushed by the Great Baobab Tree's manipulation of the convection currents, they stopped moving a few feet behind where they had been shot up by the Fire. Seeing that the air currents were not going to take them further, Faiza and Tondra condensed into storm clouds, precipitated onto the ground and reformed as human beings, bodies, lab coats, and all.

“You did it!” said Qamar, flying over past the strangler fig cage to cheer them on,

A battalion of monkey-archers armed with water-arrows had arrived around the strangler fig cage to put out the Fire of Morimi, to much success. It was now a tiny tame little campfire that one could cook a snail over without burning it. Noticing, the Sword of Tumusi beside the fire, one of the monkey-archers jumped down from the canopy, grabbed the Sword and poked it at the Fire. The Fire moved away from the Sword. So, the monkey-archer expended some of its life force to use the Sword; the monkey-archer drew a circle around the Fire, enchanting the ground with the powers of the Sword.

“Stop firing!” yelled the monkey-archer to its battalion members.

They stopped.

The Fire tried to expand further, but it could not, It would stay there, bound by the power of the Sword, until it escaped or was returned to a Container of Holding.

Turning around, the monkey-archers saw Faiza and Tondra and gave them their full attention, waiting for them to make a move.

“Well, what will it be guys and gals?” said Faiza. She grabbed a low-level illusion charm out of her pockets and activated it.

Hiss! Whirl! Klank! Thunk! The monkeys saw a mechanical fire-breathing dragon and fled in terror.

“Smartie artie trickster!” said Qamar.

“I know I am!” said Faiza. “Let's do that again!”

Faiza and Tondra held hands walked up to the Fire of Morimi. They crossed the line that had been marked with the Sword and turned themselves into water, then, into steam, again.

Distracted by what the Great Baobab Tree's Avatar was finding inside the black bag, the Great Baobab had loosened its grip on the property's convection currents, unwittingly allowing Faiza and Tondra to float up above the food forest's canopy and drift towards Simon's homestead.

Cross-referncing the knowledge that Simon had given the Great Baobab Tree when it was imbued with magic by Simon years ago, the Great Baobab Tree began to figure out what the artifacts did, one by one.

“I am running low on ATP,” said Faiza while they were drifting through the sky. “Do you have any food with you right now, Tondra?”

“No, sorry,” said Tondra. “I ate all of my super granola bars while we were trying to get past the stormcloud domes.”

Faiza sighed.

“But look on the upside,” said Tondra. “We are in Simon the AUM’s food forest, one of the best in the world. There is bound to be a lot to eat around here.”

“What do you?” said Faiza, gazing down at the food forest below them.

“I see a big goji berry tree, down there near the edge of the food forest,” said Tondra. “Do you see it?” She pointed her finger at a tree full of shiny red berries, not that far away from Simon's homestead.

“Ah, I see it,” said Faiza.

They floated down to the goji berry tree and condensed into a raincloud, precipitated through the leaves of the and reappeared beneath its branches, bright red berries dangling from its limbs. Voraciously, Faiza grabbed goji berries off of the tree's branches, stuffing as many as she could into her mouth, chewing as quickly as she could.

Squirt! Squish!

By the time that Faiza had eaten her fill and then some more, she looked like a cannibal with the fruit's reddish orange juice splattered across her face, hands, and lab coat.

“You look handsome,” said Tondra.

Faiza looked at her hands and lab coat and wiped her hands off. She took one finger and touched her face to look at what came off. *I am messy*, thought Faiza. *No matter, the mission is still going very well.* She wiped her face off on her lab coat.

Mounting for an attack, grapevines engulfed Simon's homestead and began emitting toxic fumes.

Ravens, tipped with sandbox tree sap on their beaks, and squirrels coated in valerian juice, climbed onto the roof of Simon's homestead preparing for action.

Behind Faiza and Tondra, the goats were getting bigger and bigger, almost the size of a horse.

“Beehhhh! Behhh!!” said the goats, announcing their presence.

Turning around quickly, Faiza and Tondra stared at the legs of the goats and slowly looked upwards to see their faces.

Placing her hand back inside her pocket, Faiza activated her low-level illusion charm and looked like a fire-breathing mechanical dragon, again.

Beeeeeeeeeeh!!!!!! The giant goats turned around and stomped through the food forest in fright, knocking down some trees in the process.

Speaking of knocking things over, while in the laboratory testing the samples collected from the crime scene, Viktor had walked past the sarcophagus which contained the Guardian of the Heart of Osiris and accidentally dropped the Feather of Quetzalcoatl into the sarcophagus. Latching onto the nearest source of magical energy, the Feather consumed the energy inside of Simon's old heart that was beating inside the Guardian, and it woke up. Rising from its sarcophagus, the Guardian realized that the Heart of Osiris was missing and grabbed Viktor's arm. Holding tightly, the Guardian drained Viktor of his magical energy and thus proceeded to drain all of his life force.

This was not expected, thought Yggdrasil. *I guess the Fates can be wrong, sometimes. I will just have to wait and see how this unfolds.* It swayed back and forth in the Beyond, watching events unfold in Kay Pacha. It smiled.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!” yelled the Guardian.

“Red alert! Red alert!” blared the speakers in the Bureau of Justice's skyscraper. “The Guardian of the Heart of Osiris is awake!”

It pulled itself up out of the sarcophagus, stepping over Viktor's lifeless shriveled corpse. It raised its arms and stretched from side to side; it had been a long time since the Guardian had last woken up to fight.

Strips of cloth fell down from the Guardian's body as it walked to the entrance of the lab.

“Security Code Alpha Prime Eins!” boomed the speakers. “This is not a drill!”

Gates fell down throughout all levels of the skyscraper, sealing off all rooms and hallways. All but one elevator was shut down.

On the first floor, armed with the Bow and Quiver of Gamab, Aram, the fourth in command at the Bureau of Justice, commanded the defense. At the very top of the skyscraper was Llewella, the fifth in command, armed with the Web of Marawa.

Face up against the barred windows of the laboratory, the Guardian's breath fogged up the windows. It continued to breathe deeply, and with each exhale, the fog in the laboratory got thicker and thicker until nothing could be seen at all in the laboratory.

Standing beside Aram was Isleen, holding the Eye of Ra in her hands and looking deeply into it, seeing everything in the Bureau of Justice's skyscraper and relaying all the information to Aram.

“Send the elevator to the top floor,” commanded Aram, connecting to the speakers through the UltraNet.

Whoosh! The only working elevator in the building rushed up to the top floor.

“Get the North American NanoStorm to our location pronto!” said Aram.

In less than a minute, the North American NanoStorm was hovering over the entire state of Minnesota, blocking out most of the sunlight, prepared for the next command.

“Siege floor thirty!” commanded Aram.

Bzzzz! Bzzzzzzzz! Bzz! Bzzzzzz!!!

Swooping like a gust of wind, trillions of nanobots broke through the floor of the elevator, damaging Hallbjörn in the process and flooded down the elevator shaft. In one dark vibrating buzzing mass, they densely packed the thirtieth floor.

On one side of the barred windows to the laboratory was the Guardian of the Heart, hidden in fog, and on the other side was the North American NanoStorm, poised to attack.

Out of the swirling fog, a decrepit ancient finger touched the glass window of the laboratory and pushed gently. The window shattered, and the fog that had built up poured through the thirtieth floor, clashing with the nanobots. To advance itself, the Guardian turned into a fog cloud, too, blending in the rest of the fog it had created.

Each time a nanobot came into contact with the fog the Guardian had created, the nanobots froze up and fell like flies onto the floor.

“This is not looking good,” said Llewella, speaking to Aram directly through the UltraNet. More nanobots from the North American NanoStorm rushed through the elevator shaft, pouring into the thirtieth floor, still dropping like flies upon touching the fog.

“Activate the North America NanoStorm's fire mode,” commanded Aram.

Crackle! Sizzle!

Lights lit up all across Minnesota as the sky burned.

“Siege the thirtieth floor again!” commanded Aram.

Hissing as they went down the elevator shaft, sending the walls ablaze, the nanobots flooded into the thirtieth floor devouring the moisture, devouring the fog. The thirtieth floor began to clear up as more and more nanobots cleared away the fog, bringing light to the entire floor.

“We have lost sight of the Guardian,” said Isleen.

“Activate ice mode!” said Aram.

Turning into mechanical ice crystals, they looked like snowflakes floating all across the Minnesotan sky.

Cracking the metal of the elevator shaft as they went down, the nanobots flooded the thirtieth floor, freezing everything there was.

“Bring the temperature down to absolute zero on floor thirty,” said Aram, and the temperature on the thirtieth floor plummeted.

As the molecules and particles froze, so did the Guardian, and a thick slab of ice filled containing the Guardian coalesced near the entrance to the elevator shaft. Its right hand was gripping the frame to the elevator's doors.

“Send in the androids! Create a localized absolute zero field at the Guardian's position,” said Aram. “We are moving the Guardian to a more secure location.”

Bzzzp! The North American NanoStorm returned to to normal, with the exception of the ones around the Guardian, and temperatures returned to normal on floor thirty.

Hiss! Steam was released as the androids unfroze themselves.
One! Two! Three! Four! Click! Clock! Click! Clock!

The androids marched in unison from their various posts on floor thirty to meet at the Guardian's location.

“Encase the Guardian!” announced Aram.

The nanobots in the absolute zero zone honed in on the slab of ice the Guardian was in and coated the slab with their bodies to protect the androids from freezing up while moving.

Androids got at all three available sides of the Guardian and picked it up.

“Take the Guardian to floor seventeen!” said Aram. “The Guardian will be housed in the Alpha Prime security vault.

While the nanobots were creating a platform for the androids to float on down to the seventeenth floor, the molecules and particles beneath the ice started to shake and vibrate.

Vibrating quicker and quicker, the Guardian's body started to heat and warm up.

Bzzzzzzz! Bzzzzzzzzzz! Bzzz! Bzz!

Kabloooooooooom!

The nanobot casing around the Guardian's slab of ice broke off and flew in all different directions as the Guardian shattered the ice.

Hissssssss!

Steam rapidly expanded out from the Guardian, pushing the androids deep into floor thirty's hallway, and fog rolled violently everywhere as the Guardian vaporized itself and disappeared.

“Make the skyscraper airtight,” said Aram. “The Guardian is not to reach the outside world, least of all an Infinity Gate.”

Following orders, the North American NanoStorm released a cloud of nanobots that engulfed the Bureau of Justice's skyscraper, creating an airtight bubble.

All Isleen could see with the Eye of Ra was that the fog was consuming floor thirty and rising up the elevator shaft.

“Release the bombats and timebats from floor seventeen!” commanded Aram.

Screeeeeeeech! Squeak! Squeak!

Flying out of the Alpha Prime vault, the timebats and bombats swarmed, rushing down the hallway and up the elevator shaft.

Splat! Kabloom!

Timebats and bombats blinked black light and collided with the elevators shaft wall, creating time-loops and permanent spatial confinement zones beneath the fog.

As the timebats and bombats flew upwards, chasing the fog, a few flew faster and right into the fog.

Consumed in seconds, the timebats and bombats that reached the Guardian's fog disappeared, never to be seen again.

Increasing the pace, the Guardian, inside its fog cloud, rushed up the elevator shaft and headed straight for the exit.

Isleen saw that the fog was preparing to leave the building.

“Llewella, the fog and the Guardian are headed your way,” said Isleen through the UltraNet.

Silver light pulsed from Llewella's hands as she activated the Web of Marawa which glowed black. As the power increased, the black light from the Web of Marawa got bigger and bigger, engulfing Llewella's body completely.

Fog, mimicking that of the Guardian's, was released from Llewella's position. It imitated the Guardian's behavior and the properties of its fog.

When the Guardian's fog got out of the elevator shaft and came into contact with the fog the Llewella had produced with the Web of Marawa, the Guardian became confused.

The Guardian's fog moved forward and so did Llewella's fog, in the opposite direction.

Most perplexing, thought the Guardian.

It tried moving forward again, trying to command the fog that lay in its way. It could not.

Realizing the deceit, Guardian and its fog headed back down the elevator shaft, and Llewella's fog went down in pursuit.

Timebat and bombats fluttered around the bottom of the elevator shaft, creating more and more time-loops and spatial confinement zones.

As the Guardian's fog moved down, past floor thirty, it encountered a time loop. After moving forwards, time was rewound and the Guardian's fog was back where it had started.

Pushing against the sides of the elevator shaft, the Guardian's fog encountered the spatial confinement zones. Whenever the fog came into contact with the spatial confinement zones, it would go through one side of the elevator shaft and reappear inside the shaft on the opposite side.

Whoosh!

The Guardian's fog headed back into floor thirty and filled all the rooms within it.

“It's trapped!” exclaimed Isleen, excited. “The Guardian and its fog have returned to floor thirty.”

“Not so fast,” said Aram. “Let us wait for it to make the next move.”

It did.

It entered the ventilation shafts inside the skyscraper and split into two segments- one to go upwards and one to go downwards.

“The Guardian's fog has split into two. It is unknown which fog cloud contains the Guardian,” said Isleen. “I advise extreme caution.”

Llewella wrapped the Web of Marawa around her left arm, putting it on autopilot. She pulled out a vial containing the Breath of Pak-A-A. She uncorked it, and a violent gust of wind blew through the air shafts of the skyscraper, from the top and bottom, pushing the Guardian's two fog clouds back onto floor thirty, out where they could see it.

Temperatures dropping, the Guardian tried to freeze the Breath of Pak-A-A. It did not work.

Llewella commanded the Breath of Pak-A-A to push the Guardian's fog into one location, to force it back into the sarcophagus.

Rolling inwards from all directions, the Guardian's fog was slowly pushed back into the laboratory.

“Send in the North American NanoStorm again, fire mode followed by ice mode,” said Aram.

Hiss! Crack!

The Guardian dropped the temperatures on floor thirty, extinguishing the nanobots' fires before they could reduce the moisture content in floor thirty. As they came into contact with the Guardian's fog, the nanobots fell onto the ground, lifeless.

Whoosh!

The Breath of Pak-A-A rushed through floor thirty, towards the Guardian's fog and into the laboratory.

The Breath of Pak-A-A went along the walls of the laboratory and along the ceiling and floor, squeezing the Guardian's fog into a dense ball.

Tighter and tighter, the Guardian's fog was compressed until a humanoid shape was formed.

Picking up the humanoid shape, presumed to be the Guardian, Llewella commanded the Breath of Pak-A-A to place the humanoid into the sarcophagus and place the lid on top, sealing it shut.

Doing as instructed, the Breath of Pak-A-A dropped the humanoid into the sarcophagus and sealed it shut.

”The Guardian has been returned to the sarcophagus,” said Isleen to the Aram and Llewella.

Aram pulled Anarkusuga's Ice cube from out of his pocket and activated it. Ice crystals enveloped the sarcophagus, bringing its temperature back to absolute zero.

Just to be sure it was safe, Aram said, “I want some of the nanobots from the North American NanoStorm to create an absolute zero shell around the Guardian's sarcophagus.”

It was done. A nanobot absolute zero shell encased the guardian's sarcophagus, working in tandem with Anarkusuga's Ice Cube to cease all motion within the sarcophagus in all dimensions.

“Release the airtight seal around the skyscraper,” said Aram.

The nanobots surrounding the skyscraper dispersed and returned to integrate with the North American NanoStorm, floating over Minnesota.

“Move all of the timebats and bombats into the laboratory on floor thirty,” said Aram. “The area must be secured, and the Guardian must be prepped for transport.”

Corking up the vial again, Llewella called the Breath of Pak-A-A to return to her.

Then, she called back the fog that she had created with the Web of Marawa. The fog rolled inwards, returning back to her, disappearing into the Web of Marawa.

“Go on! Get back inside,” said Llewella, talking to a stubborn fog cloud that did not want to return and disappear.

“Come on, just because you have a conscious is now excuse,” said Llewella.

I know, thought the fog cloud, consciousness does not inherently imply good ethics.

It solidified and condensed into the Guardian, and it reached out its arm and grabbed Llewella by the throat, lifting her up into the air, feet thrashing about. It all ended quickly as the Guardian absorbed her magical energy and extracted her life force.

Rapidly returning to fog again, the Guardian flew off of the rooftop and down the side of the skyscraper, heading for the Infinity Gate, half a klick down the road.

“The Guardian has escaped!” cried Isleen. “It is heading in the direction of the Infinity Gate, and hundreds of people are dying outside.”

Collapsing left and right, the Guardian asphyxiated hundreds of people in the streets as they breathed in its fog.

“After it!” yelled Aram through the UltraNet. “And call the Global Citizen Science Action Network now! There are not going to be enough donors to let them all return from Purgatory! Tell them to prepare thousands of humanoid simulacrum; and tell them to make as many upgrades as possible available when the simulacrum become occupied. People are going to want as close to their old bodies back as possible, so they can resume life back where they left off. If the Global Citizen Science Action Network asks how the bill is going to be paid, tell them that the Bureau of Justice will foot the bill. Got that, Isleen?”

“Yes, I’m on it!” said Isleen. She got started calling the international and regional leaders of the Global Citizen Science Action Network, asking them to prepare as many humanoid simulacrum as they possibly could and to make as many upgrades available to the people inhabiting the bodies.

“North American NanoStorm,” said Aram. “I want a full shutdown of the entire state of Minnesota. Turn off all life forms; put them into stasis immediately. All power grids are to go offline.”

The North American NanoStorm descended upon the state of Minnesota like a torrential rainstorm, falling down onto all people, all buildings, everything.

“The only thing I want actively alive in Minnesota is my team!” said Aram.

Pelting everything, the nanobots entered people's bodies, entering the bodies of every living organism in Minnesota from the amoebas and fungi to the city-trees and mammoth-sentinels.

“Nothing else is going to die today!” said Aram. “Nobody, not one single living cell.”

Replacing bodily fluids with a biological antifreeze, the nanobots encased every living and brought their temperatures down to absolute zero, preventing the Guardian's fog from hurting them.

“Call in the hyperfalcons,” said Aram.

He ran out of the Bureau of Justice's skyscraper and into the street, his Quiver of Gamab buoncing on his back and the Bow of Gamab firmly held in his right hand.

As he crossed the threshold, he called back to Isleen, “Make sure the Bureau of Death Management and the Bureau of Population Management make the proper arrangements for getting people back into their new bodies. And where are our Wands of Leeching???????”

“I will be sure to make the proper arrangements,” said Isleen. “Remember, two years ago, Faiza played with them, counter to protocol, and our bureau had the use of the Wands of Leeching revoked for an indefinite period of time!”

Shit! thought Aram. “Thanks! Get the Bureau of Warfare's people, machinery, and weapons here as soon as possible! We need those Wands!”

“Will do!” said Isleen, She was frantically making calls over the UltraNet, calling the Bureau of Warfare, the Bureau of Death Management, and the Bureau of Population Management. *What a mess!* she thought.

Thinking smartly, she asked, “May I also call the International Department of Universal Transport to get them to shut down the Infinity Gate Network?”

“Yes!” said Aram. “Do whatever you think is necessary. We have the power. Faiza and Tondra are out on a mission, we are the top two in command right now! Go do it!”

A flock of hyperfalcons flew down from above, hurtling towards the Infinity Gate, racing to get there before the Guardian.

Dropping timebombs all around the street, trying to hit the Guardian's fog cloud, portals opened up, rewinding the moments. The Guardian skillfully dodged each one.

“System in shutdown,” said the speakers near the Infinity Gate. “The Infinity gate Network will be down in ten seconds.”

Aram stood along the outside on the street, empty and devoid with people and organisms preserved unmoving. He pulled an Arrow out of his Quiver and placed it in his Bow.

Lining up his sight on the the Guardian's fog cloud, he prepared to shoot.

“Five!” blared the speakers.

Aram focused on the the Guardian's fog cloud, tracking its every movement.

“Four!” said the speakers.

Huuuummm!!!!!!

Aram loosed the Arrow of Gamab from his Bow, and it hurtled towards the Guardian.

“Three!” said the speakers.

Freezebombs were dropped by the hyperfalcons in an attempt to slow down the Guardian. They collided with the Arrow of Gamab, stopping it in its tracks.

Aram loosed another Arrow quickly from his Bow, and it trailed behind the Guardian's fog cloud.

“Two!” said the speakers.

Whish!

The Guardian's fog cloud passed through the Infinity Gate.

“One!” said the speakers, and the Arrow whizzed through the Infinity Gate.

“Zero!” said the speakers, and the Infinity Gate Network shut down all over planet Earth.

Aram ran back inside the Bureau of Justice's skyscraper.

“Where was that Infinity Gate linked to, Isleen?” said Aram.

Checking her log of communications from the International Department of Universal Transport, Isleen said, “That Infinity Gate was connected to Manhattan, New York.”

Back in Cafe Mani, Zlata saw Jun, Gorica, Kai, Kojo, Aucaman, and Betje sitting in a trance around the table with their hands at different places on their bodies.

“Hello!” said Zlata, waving her hand in front of Jun's face.

No response.

She placed their food at their spots and left. Zlata thought, *they must be having an interesting Collective Dream*. She thought nothing of the Infinity map; many people loved to travel the universe virtually by getting into a dream state with an Infinity Map in their hands. *Maybe they are traveling together*, she thought. *That makes sense*. Then, she disappeared back into the cafe's mist to serve the rest of the customers.

With his fingers on the Canoe of Lono inside his waistpouch, Kai thought of being safe, protected, and hidden, and the mist in the cafe around them formed a sphere enveloping them, shrouding them from sight. Anything that passed into the misty sphere would reappear on the other side.

The Guardian's fog cloud hurtled through Manhattan's Infinity Gate, in search of the Heart of Osiris. The scent was very strong here.

In Simon's food forest, the Great Baobab Tree's Avatar found the Scythe of Kronos, and started to sweep it back and forth, noticing how the leaves and grass returned to where they were a few moments ago. Interesting, thought the Great Baobab Tree.

Remembering that she had her lab coat on, Faiza pulled the Leaf of Leshy from her lab coat, an artifact that she stole a long time ago with no intent of returning it. Blue lights shimmered from her hand as she activated the Leaf.

“Grab my hand!” said Faiza.

Tondra grabbed Faiza's hand that contained the Leaf, and they walked towards Simon's homestead.

Jumping off of the roof, the squirrels charged at Faiza and Tondra, but as soon as they felt the pulses emanating from the Leaf, the squirrels stopped where they were, shook their heads, and scampered off into Simon's food forest to feast on acorns.

As they go closer, the ravens flew off of the roof of Simon's homestead and flew straight for them, fast as a laserbeam.

Upon feeling the energy radiating from the Leaf of Leshy, the ravens changed directions and flew off into the sunset.

They walked hand in hand to Simon's homestead, and the noxious fumes emitted from the grapevines turned into the fragrance of ripe ready to eat grapes.

They peeled back the grapevines that were covering the door to Simon's homestead and ran through the building together, searching for the Scales of Anubis.

Once they reached Simon's bedroom, they found the Scales of Anubis lying on the floor. *Mission accomplished*, thought Faiza. We will get the bureau of Warfare here, later, to clean up the mess. She grabbed the Scales and thought of the Bureau of Justice's skyscraper. Polychromatic lights flashed beneath them, and they sank into the portal, reappearing on the first floor of the Bureau of Justice's skyscraper. The Great Baobab Tree was too busy using its Avatar to investigate all of the artifacts in Faiza's black bag that it had released its grip on the teleport jammer.

“Why didn't you come here sooner?” yelled Aram when he saw Faiza and Tondra. “The Guardian of the Heart of Osiris has escaped, and you weren't there to help us. Mind you, we did put up a good fight.”

He looked at Faiza, noticing the goji berry juice smeared and splattered all over her lab coat, their messed up hair, and the lack of Faiza's black bag. He also noticed that Faiza was holding the Scales of Anubis.

“Well done, somewhat,” said Aram. “What happened to your black bag, Faiza?”

“Simon's the AUM's Great Baobab Tree took it,” she said. “But it isn't a problem, we can call the Bureau of Warfare, and they will handle the situation.”

“I am talking to them right now through thr UltraNet,” said Isleen.

“Faiza, get to the seventeenth floor and retrieve the Emptiness of Ginnungagap,” said Aram.

“Than travel to the roof of the building and create a Primordial Gate. The Infinity Gate network has been shutdown, and we need a way to transport the North American NanoStorm quickly.”

“Got it!” said Faiza. She ran to Aram, handing him the Scales of Anubis and the Leaf of Leshy. “Hold these for me, please.”

Swooping in on their megadactals over the skies of Manhattan, the warriors, magicians, scientists, and machinists from the Bureau of Warfare flew overhead, armed with the Wands of Leeching.

More people fell victim to the Guardian's deadly fog cloud as it raced through the streets to get to Cafe Mani.

Faiza floated up the elevator shaft, drifted painlessly through floor seventeen now that all systems in the building were shutdown. She thought about the Emptiness and called it to her. A small black little test tube came flying from the darkness, and she caught with her hand.

She flew back through the hallway and up the elevator shaft to the rooftop. She uncorked the vial, and poured her magical energy into the Emptiness, opening up a Primordial Gate. Thinking of Manhattan, she connected the Gate to the water fountain in the Lincoln Center.

After seeing Faiza open up the Primordial Gate, Isleen said, "The Gate is ready, Aram."

"Preserve all the people and organisms in Manhattan," said Aram to the North American NanoStorm, and the NanoStorm funneled through the Gate entering the streets of Manhattan. Then back to Isleen, he said, "the same deal as we gave here shall be made available to the people of Manhattan that were slain by the Guardian. "

Mission compromised, thought Jun inside the collective dream. *Abort mission*.

"We must escape," said Jun to her team. "Kojo, activate your Elekke." In just a few seconds, all of them were removed from their bodies and tucked away in a far corner of the Ether, disconnected from their bodies. Their heads fell back and their eyes rolled back as their bodies were were killed. Drifting in the Ether, they hid, searching for new bodies to take over.

While the North American NanoStorm was preserving the people of Manhattan, the bureau of warfare's troops eyed the fog cloud that was racing through the streets of Manhattan and leeches its power until it could move no more.

They trapped the Guardian of the Heart of Osiris, walked inside Cafe Mani to find a group of strange people dead with their eyes rolled back.

Thump, squish, thump, squish.

They heard the beating of the heart of Osiris and removed it from the snake leather bag beside the Chinese lady's feet.

They returned to the, now in mummy-form, Guardian and placed the Heart of Osiris inside its chest.